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# All That is Possible Can Be Imagined: Leibniz's *Von der Allmacht*

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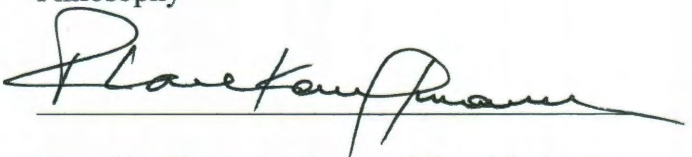

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ABSTRACT

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Leibniz's 'Von der Allmacht und Allwissenheit Gottes und der Freiheit des Menschen' is obscure and misunderstood. First I do a close reading of the work. Then I will discuss some scholarly interpretations, as well as VdA's place in Leibniz's thought. I challenge two scholarly assumptions—the first being that Leibniz rejected then accepted privation theory. I argue that there are two types of privation theories, using illustrative historical examples, and that Leibniz objected to one and adopted the other. Secondly, many scholars opine that the *Confessio* is a juvenile *Theodicy*. I take VdA to be an important predecessor to the *Theodicy* due to similarities in style, content and method. Finally, I link Leibniz's definition of possibility in VdA with an important connection between truth and existence. In this respect, Leibniz's ideas of possibility and conceivability are the forerunners of a current topic in philosophy.

## Acknowledgements

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# All That is Possible Can Be Imagined: Leibniz's *Von der Allmacht*

## Introduction

'Von der Allmacht und Allwissenheit Gottes und der Freiheit des Menschen', or 'On the Omnipotence and Omniscience of God and the Freedom of Man' (henceforth VdA) is a unique work on the problem of evil that has often been misunderstood. To be certain, it is a bewildering work—one of the few Leibniz wrote in German, it seems to offer no positive conclusions and is often placed in the development of Leibniz's thought on evil as an unfinished footnote to the *Confessio Philosophi*. In this paper, I intend to wrestle with the standard view of VdA as an aporetic predecessor to the *Confessio*, bringing the text to a wider audience. I begin with an analysis of VdA that sets aside Leibniz's other works on evil, free will and necessity, as well as any scholarly interpretations. In VdA Leibniz does refute both what he will later call the 'lazy reason' and a version of medieval privation theory, but he does so via his positive views on possibility and necessity. These views are the main positive contributions of the work. VdA has been overlooked largely because readers expecting a lengthy discussion on the problem of evil come away disappointed; however, the positive theses within do have a large impact on Leibniz's views of evil, free will and grace. Finally, Leibniz does make statements about punishments and rewards, concepts which are intertwined with grace and the justice of God, understood in Leibniz as the template of divine harmony.

Originally I presented my analysis as a close reading that followed the order of the text. However, in this paper I will present VdA's main ideas before noting some other

important aspects. Both the main ideas and the other aspects will be the subject of further discussion later on; however, I intend to present them all as a package to underscore the fruitfulness of VdA and to establish a common understanding of VdA before examining its place in Leibniz's philosophy. The next step is to bring VdA into the context of Leibniz's other early writings, especially the *Confessio philosophi*. It is not exaggerating to say that the only scholarly attention that VdA has received has been motivated by a desire to analyze the *Confessio* and surrounding writings. However, despite the paucity of scholarly analyses and the brevity of their duration, there are some conflicting opinions on the text. Bob Sleigh has discussed it in several published works as well as the introduction to the Yale *Confessio* volume; Jack Davidson has a short but excellent article in which he focuses on VdA and the *Confessio* as two early influences on Leibniz's *Theodicy*. Lastly, Paul Rateau, in his book *La question du mal chez Leibniz: fondements et élaboration de la* Théodicée, sharply distinguishes VdA from the *Confessio* and puts more emphasis on VdA's impact on the *Theodicy* than the *Confessio's*. Rateau's position is the most extreme, and, as such, the most interesting. Though I agree that the *Confessio* and VdA have some important differences, the evidence that Rateau relies on to strongly differentiate them is weak, since he relies on a lost Latin dialogue written before the *Confessio* and on an arguably coincidental connection between VdA and the thought of Luther and Hobbes. Thus I will flesh out the differences between VdA and the *Confessio* on the grounds of their content alone.

There are some other important threads to explicate, one of which is privation theory, a topic specifically addressed in VdA. Roughly, Leibniz rejects the view that God is

responsible for all the good in the world, and creatures for all the evil, which is found in some Scholastic writers. Having noted the similarities between VdA and another early text, 'L'auteur du peché', I believe that Leibniz never changed his stance on historical privation theory or on the picture of divine and human concurrence that such a view entails. Though Sleigh believes that Leibniz adopted privation theory in the *Theodicy* after realizing that his position in the *Confessio* was untenable, I agree with Rateau here that the switch from the *Confessio*-period to the *Theodicy* on privation theory is not a yes-no heel-turn. I allege that privation theories cannot be neutral with respect to concurrence theories. Thus Leibniz does endorse a type of privation theory in the *Theodicy*; however, I also argue that there is more than one type of privation theory. The easiest way to advance this thesis is by examining the historical tradition of privation theory, including the historical version Leibniz lampoons in VdA and 'L'auteur du peché'. I intend to make a distinction between separation and limitation theory, two versions of what is commonly called privation theory. I will briefly discuss the hybrid Augustinian-Thomist view which is Leibniz's main target in VdA and the *Theodicy*, and characterize another version of limitation theory, that of Plotinus. My aim here is not to suggest that Leibniz was historically aware of these theories or their nuances, but to demonstrate the distinction via plausible examples. Then I will make sense of a remark of Leibniz's, "And it surprises me that the profound Descartes stumbled here too".[1] 'Here' in this case means on the issue of divine and human concurrence. Thus I end the section with some preliminary work on Leibniz versus Descartes on evil, the locus of which is Leibniz's annotations of

[1] A.VI.i 545. The English quotes of VdA are from the Yale volume, translated by Brandon Look. Sleigh is responsible for the other translations in this volume.

Descartes' *Principles*.[2] It is my hope that some work in this area will open up further insight and discussion.

Next, I will discuss VdA's relationship to Leibniz's late work on evil, the *Theodicy*. Until recently, scholars have not seen much difference between the *Confessio* and the *Theodicy* and have understood the *Confessio* as a juvenile work—in Grua's words, a "Théodicée de jeunesse".[3] Even Sleigh, who has treated the *Confessio* as a work in its own right, maintains that Leibniz held a group of "fundamental propositions" at the beginning of his career that stayed with him throughout his life, differing only in application.[4] In another paper, 'Leibniz's First Theodicy', Sleigh characterizes the *Confessio* as Leibniz's first substantial attempt at solving the package of problems centered around sin. While I remain undecided on an issue that Rateau champions—that the *Theodicy*, which is a word coined by Leibniz for his 1710 book, has a unique application to that book and cannot be extended to any work taking up the problem of evil and related issues—I do agree with him on another point, namely that VdA has more similarities to the *Theodicy* than the *Confessio* does.[5]

However, more is at stake here than a terminological dispute. In this section I hope to demonstrate that VdA has at least as much influence on the *Theodicy* as the *Confessio* does. Part of my justification is that there are similarities with respect to the content and

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2 Michael Latzer's analysis of Descartes' views is the relevant piece of secondary literature to look to here; his portrayal of Descartes' theory suggests it anticipates Leibniz's criticism of separation theory and his move towards limitation theory.

3 Grua, vii

4 Sleigh 166

5 Paul Rateau, interview held during the Notre Dame Conference "Leibniz's Theodicy: Context and Content", South Bend, IN, September 17th, 2010

the topic up for discussion in the *Confessio* and the *Theodicy*. By contrast, there are similarities of content, style and method between VdA and the *Theodicy*. It is the *method* of VdA that renders it a youthful sally into the theodicean style. In all of Leibniz's other writings on evil, he takes a theological and theoretical (metaphysical) standpoint. With that being understood, the *Theodicy* comes as a shock. It's no wonder that for years it was treated merely as a quotation source for scholars seeking to advance their own arguments about Leibniz's other works, rather than a rich and rewarding philosophical work in its own right. My suggestion is that VdA anticipates the aspects of the *Theodicy* that make the book such a difficult read, because Leibniz is discussing the problem of evil from an anthropological or practical side as well as a theological and metaphysical one. (Other theories of evil have tried to do the same, with predictable results: no one understands). Thus, Leibniz appeals to *a posteriori* evidence and arguments, and emphasizes the role human cognition can play in the perception of evil, because he is taking a simultaneous bottom-up and top-down approach. Not, as some scholars think, merely because he is attempting to cater to a wide audience or trying to please the least common denominator.

Thus, in order to understand the pragmatic aspect of the *Theodicy*, one must look to the parts that expound human faith and human action. As Leibniz says in VdA, it doesn't matter if you understand the metaphysics; "it is enough that you did not want to give up your sinning and take responsibility for your salvation".[6] Thus, when viewing the problem of evil from the viewpoint of a human being who seems doomed to sin, faith suffices even if reason fails. Despite there not being an explicit discussion of the faith versus reason distinction in VdA, it thus seems to me to be broadcasting the same

[6] A.VI.i 542

message as the *Theodicy*. This aspect of a theory of evil is often overlooked, but is extremely important: what is the use of giving a rationale for evil on the one hand and understanding it on the other, if there is not a compassionate understanding for evil's impact and at least a suggestion about its avoidance presented as well? Leibniz gives what I take to be the first humanistic theory of evil since Plotinus, showing both that he understands that metaphysics can't console a grieving widow and that being stoically optimistic and faithful really is the only defense on 'the front lines' of evil.

The last thread that I will take up is Leibniz's linkage of possibility with imagination. First of all, in VdA Leibniz introduces a notion of possibility wherein possibility is linked to being able to imagine something; therefore, being impossible involves just the opposite, not being able to imagine something happening. Moreover, the metaphysical notion of possibility that Leibniz is getting at here is a formal, logical notion. Furthermore, insofar as the rationalists are linked to such a concept, it is used to connect epistemological truth to metaphysical existence. In fact, in a recent paper, David Chalmers argues that "there is a long tradition in philosophy of using a priori methods to draw conclusions about what is possible and what is necessary, and often in turn to draw conclusions about matters of substantive metaphysics".[7] He traces the basic structure of this argument as beginning with "what can be known or conceived", going through the possible or necessary, and then arriving at a claim about things in the world.[8] Chalmers defines several types of possible relationships between possibility and conceivability, and I will demonstrate which one matches Leibniz's. Both Leibniz and Chalmers agree that it

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[7] Chalmers 145
[8] Ibid.

is too easy merely to equate epistemology with modality, however, which leads to a rich but difficult notion of possible conceivables for Leibniz. In this section I will argue that Leibniz's thoughts on this issue, both in VdA and in the *Theodicy*, deserve a closer look and add something of value to the contemporary debate, which began with a paper of Yablo's and has attracted a lot of recent attention.

## Possibility and the Lazy Reason in VdA

A sensible first impression of VdA is, "What just happened?" The more you look at "Damit wir aber", the more it looks like a swear, as though it leads into a section that would banish some of our perplexity but instead leaves us as frustrated and regretful as Sappho's famous "alla pan tomaton". The 'But we' that begins section twenty seems to signal a sea change, a rhetorical transition from "Look what the ignorant think" to "this is what 'we' the enlightened think". Of course we will never know what Leibniz intended to write. Thus, it is doubly important that we understand what he has already written. Before entangling with the secondary literature at all, I will offer my own interpretation of the contents of VdA. I intend in this section to introduce important textual points that will come up again later, and to dispel an illusion that many scholars hold: 'Leibniz never says anything positive in this text'. I will trace Leibniz's line of argument against the so-called Lazy Reason or any similar fatalist dogma, boiling it down to the neat slogan that foreknowledge is not predestination. That is, God's knowing how something will turn out is merely epistemic, not causal. Then, I will extract some definitions of possibility and necessity from VdA. It is these definitions that form the bulk of Leibniz's positive

contribution. But, like Socrates demolishing false views so that room can be made for the true ones, much of VdA is spent focusing on bringing Leibniz's readers to a state of aporia. However, in doing so and expounding his reasons for doing so, Leibniz does imply some desiderata for a theory of evil.

Essentially the Lazy Reason argument boils down to this:

(a) Whatever God foresees must happen or cannot not happen.

(b) God foresees that I shall be damned.

(c) Therefore, my damnation is inevitable or will happen no matter what I do.

Some people have used this fatalist argument as an excuse to be lazy, thinking that they have no control over what happens because what will happen will happen no matter what. In an uncharacteristically invective-laden passage, Leibniz calls these people fools "destined to poverty and...negligence" and demands that they "pay attention".[9] He says that "sin is found only in the will", and an evil will deserves punishment.[10] This means that "someone asleep or drunk does not sin where there is no will"; moreover, it implies that if there is a will but no corresponding action, there is still sin.[11] Although this is a strict definition of sin, it does mean that the sinner has strong control over whether he sins. Also, this view stresses human responsibility. Even when Leibniz imagines his whiny interlocutor asking, "Why didn't God make me better so that I don't sin at all?", he counters with, "here I am not obliged to answer you; it is enough that you did not want to

[9] A.VI.i 542
[10] Ibid.
[11] A.VI.i 542

give up your sinning and take responsibility for your salvation".[12] Although such posturing could be interpreted as deflecting, as Leibniz covering up the fact that he can't answer the question, I think we can be charitable here. Leibniz wants to stress the fact that humans can do nothing about God or the nature of the universe; however, they do have control over their own will. Thus, it is unproductive to rail against what they cannot change and ignore what they *can*.

But Leibniz does dismiss the syllogism in a more philosophical manner. In order to explain the error committed by those who accept its reasoning, he introduces the following definition of possibility:

(P1): If x is possible, x can be clearly explained without confusion and without contradiction.

Leibniz intends to distinguish causal possibility from epistemic knowledge. For the purposes of the syllogism, the knowledge in question is God's foreknowledge. What he does is plug in his definition of possibility to show that the syllogism fails. Thus Leibniz must take the phrase "must happen or cannot not happen" as the phrase where the equivocation occurs. However, it looks as though Leibniz uses a different, albeit related, definition of possibility to make the substitution:

(P2): If x is possible, x can be imagined.

This definition comes from Leibniz's modification of the first premise of the syllogism,

[12] Ibid.

(a), to read, "Whatever God foresees, I cannot imagine not happening, that is, I cannot imagine it even if I want to".[13] This is obviously not true; we can imagine all sorts of things happening which will not happen and which God foresees will not happen.

Moreover, this definition of possibility, along with the others Leibniz provides, all seek to expand the sphere of possibilities beyond the sphere of necessities. If everything that is possible equals everything that is necessary, then the world is necessitarian. However, if the range of possibilities is wider than the range of necessities, necessitarianism can be avoided. Part of Leibniz's argument against the Lazy Reason is his claim that people who believe in the Lazy Reason fully identify the possible with the necessary. What his definitions of possibility do is establish how something can be possible (that is, able to be done or remain undone), how something can be impossible, and how something can be necessary. Something can be impossible either because of a logical truth preventing it from being possible, or because of context. For instance, if the sentence 'Sarah is a bachelor' is evaluated, one can judge that it is impossible for Sarah to be a bachelor because Sarah is female. This differs from the example in which 'Jones is a bachelor' is impossible because he is married. The first set of cases are necessarily impossible, whereas the second set are relative. The important point is the relationship of the sphere of necessities to the sphere of possible and impossible. There are some things that are possible necessarily, and some things that are impossible necessarily, but the sphere of possibles, whether they are actual or not, does not just consist in necessities. This is due to the distinction between necessary- and context-dependent possibilities/impossibilities. The context-dependent possibilities are defined by circumstance. Jones could have

[13] A.VI.i 540

remained a bachelor or gotten married; because he is married, it is not possible for him (at this moment) to be a bachelor, but he had free will in his choice and chose to be married.

There is still a worry about the nature of P1 and P2. Leibniz defines the possible as able to be explained clearly and non-contradictorily. Although the latter seems to be moving us towards a formal definition, the former is epistemic. If everything that happens happens for a reason, then all the possibles must have a rational explanation. It is clear that explaining something rationally involves a cognitive process, in this case translated as imagination [einbilden]. However, even understanding imagination as a technical process can't extricate us from our trouble.[14] It seems we are still bound by our own cognitive limitations. Perhaps what Leibniz means is that a perfect being correctly discerns all the possibles from all the impossibles. But if that is the case, it's not clear how close an approximation our imagination can be. It is arguable that Leibniz could have skipped straight to the difference between prescience and predetermination (that is, he could have defined those two concepts rather than import a digressive definition of possibility into his argument). However, it is important to recall that Leibniz is singling out the category of things you can't imagine even if you want to as a guide to impossibility, whether circumstantial or logical.

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[14] I suggested to Brandon Look, the translator of this text, that Leibniz was aiming at a neo-Scholastic notion of 'imagination' in using the word *einbilden*, perhaps following the lead of a German textbook. Because, to express Look's own sentiment, "Leibniz just didn't write enough in German for us to know what's happening here", he suggested I look in Grimm's Wörterbuch. I plan to take up this point in a later section, but it seems as though *einbilden* is a German term for the technical Scholastic Latin 'imaginare', which is tied up in theories of scholastic mental representation.

The third substitution makes it even easier to see that the first premise is false. The definition is:

(P3): If x is possible, x can remain undone.

The modified premise then becomes, "What will happen will not remain undone, even if God wanted it not to happen".[15] This contradicts God's omnipotence, and it gets at Leibniz's main criticism—namely, that "will happen" is different than "must happen". God's foreseeing an event means that it *will* happen, *but it does not mean that God's foreseeing it is its cause*. The case for the distinction can be run in purely human terms:

Say that you have a friend named Josh. Josh is arachnophobic, and you have witnessed this firsthand. Tonight our hapless protagonist will encounter a spider in his apartment. You know exactly what will happen when he sees it; in fact, if I told you where he would encounter it and whether he was with anyone, you could probably map out the resulting scene for me. But, none of that knowledge makes Josh *do* those actions. You have no control over him. In fact, if you *could* make Josh do things, you would make him overcome his crippling phobia. The separation between knowing something will happen and *making* it happen is easier to see in this case, because it doesn't involve an omnipotent, omniscient being. But the analogy transfers nonetheless. God too sees what Josh will do. *But he does not cause it.* This is something that Leibniz insists even if God did create the world and the circumstances because of which Josh became arachnophobic *and* each particular instance in which Josh must confront a spider. Despite it seeming as though we have no choice in the matter, we do have free will. Thus, Leibniz believes that

[15] A.VI.i 541

God can know everything we will do and be responsible for providing the means, so to speak, but he insists that "what depends upon your will is up to you".[16] This notion may be unsatisfying given that God could have changed the circumstances so that the sinner never had the opportunity to sin, but although Leibniz mentions this possibility, his answer is just to insist that free will mitigates all of the pseudo-determinism imposed by God. It is true that this answer is somewhat unsatisfying, but at the same time it's unclear how Leibniz could have better answered this challenge given the short length of VdA and the rough nature of its philosophy.

However, there is one final point that I will make about its philosophy. Leibniz has been advocating the view that equating what is possible with what is necessary (and only what is necessary) is false. But from his definitions of possibility we can glean a definition of necessity because all necessary things must be possible. Because Leibniz essentially worked his way through three progressive definitions of possibility which began as a purely epistemic concept (both P1 and P2 link conceivability with possibility) and ended as a purely metaphysical one, we can ignore the first two definitions and skip to the third one (since the first two definitions involve cognitive limitations):

> (N3): If x is necessary, x cannot help but be done (even if one does not want to do it).

Thus, to summarize, here are the resulting definitions of possibility and necessity in VdA, which lead to mutually exclusive spheres of impossible and possible, but a sphere of necessary that is smaller than the sphere of the possible:

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[16] A.VI.i 542

(P1): If x is possible, x can be clearly explained without confusion and without contradiction.

(N1): If x is necessary, x cannot help but be clearly explained without confusion and without contradiction.

(P2): If x is possible, x can be imagined.

(N2): If x is necessary, x cannot be imagined not to be.

(P3): If x is possible, x can be done (if one wants to do it).

(N3): If x is necessary, x cannot help but be done.

The gap is most visible in P3 and N3. N3 says that the necessaries *must* be done, whereas the possibles can or cannot be done. Therefore, what is possible is different than what is necessary, so people who believe in the Lazy Reason are mistaken.

Before explicating the rest of VdA, I'd like to skip back to the title for one second. The work is called 'Von der Allmacht und Allwissenheit Gottes und der Freiheit des Menschen'. Translated that means, 'On the Omnipotence and Omniscience of God and the Freedom of Man'. But why would Leibniz name his work thus? My suggestion is twofold, given the problems in reconciling the two. Leibniz wants to exorcise us of the misperception that we have no free will given God's power and omniscience. Most of that work is done in arguing against historical or folk philosophy positions. However, the definitions that I have teased out of the text should also give some sign of Leibniz's positive position.

Consider the third set of definitions. Because these relate most closely to *doing* and not mere cognition, it is easier to get a decent concept of free will from this set, though it can be done for the others. Free will is not exercised in cases where x is necessary. Thus, by negating N3, we get:

(FW): x is done freely iff x can be done or not be done.

FW both prevents someone willing x freely when x is necessary, and someone willing not-x freely when x is impossible. For instance, say Jocasta desires that there not be any bishops in Thebes (during her reign). It is impossible that there be any bishops in Thebes, so her desire is satisfied. Leibniz would say that Jocasta did not have it in her power to make there be bishops in Thebes if she had willed there to be some; thus, she did not exercise free will in this case. However, given Leibniz's rejection of middle knowledge (which I will discuss in the next section), free will cannot be understood as perfect indifference; Leibniz doubts that such a thing exists. Rather, free will can be exercised in a case where the best choice is unclear due to cognitive limitations, conflicting reasons or lack of decisive information. Due to Leibniz's dependence on reason, he must say that given an ideal reasoner, there would never be a choice scenario between two competing options. If perfect indifference is impossible, then no two options are equal.

However, this applies even in cases where the best option is unclear—that is, there always is a better choice and a worse one. So even if one is not an ideal reasoner and will sometimes make the wrong choice, there is a definitive 'right' and 'wrong'. Moreover, that means that there is an ideal path to be taken through life for everyone, making the

concept of free will even narrower because rationality dictates a clear life path. Although this does mean that Leibniz has boxed himself into an Augustinian-style view where free will is only truly *exercised* to one's own detriment, I think Leibniz himself would respond that this isn't objectionable at all.[17] (He can say that we have free will all of the time, but the only actions we can perform without the concord of God and/or reason are less desirable than their alternatives). However, someone acting based on ideal justifications would maximize the happiness of his life and minimize the evil. Leibniz would say that even the ideal reasoner who can always see the best alternative still has free will when making choices, even if he can only really choose one of them.

## Rejection of Historical Theories

The two major historical views that Leibniz rejects are those of privation theory and middle knowledge. Privation theory is a standard medieval strategy that makes sense of evil as a means to a greater good. Thus God's benevolent character can be preserved, while leaving room for human responsibility and free will. As Leibniz characterizes it:

> (1) Sin is a nothing.
>
> (2) Sin consists in the lack of an appropriate perfection.
>
> (3) God is the cause of all that is real and positive (creatures and actually existent things), not the imperfection that causes sin.

[17] This view is presented in works such as 'On the Free Choice of the Will' and states that the only time a human acts on his or her own is when he/she acts against God (otherwise there is divine concurrence in the action). However, such a view may seem quirky but is relatively common.

Leibniz gives two reasons this theory is flawed—first, that this is akin to someone causing the number three and denying that he caused its oddness; secondly, that this is like saying a bad musician is only responsible for the rhythms and technique of his playing, not for the dissonance that results. The core idea behind his examples is, essentially, that one cannot split up causation so that one is responsible for the doughnut but not the doughnut hole, despite being responsible for the shape of the doughnut. More generally, this picture of causation involves an unnatural separation.

But there is more to criticize here. Leibniz says that, if the bad musician case is true, then how can we hold the musician himself responsible? If the musician doesn't cause the dissonance, then it seems that no one does since it is a privation, a nonbeing. Freeing himself from the analogy, Leibniz follows with, "Indeed, I do not see why one holds the sinner himself to be a cause of sin; he does the deed...and who can do anything about the fact that this deed is not in harmony with the love of God?"[18] The sinner seems to have no control over his sin under this view; in Leibniz's own words, "no concurrence or influx...takes place".[19] God certainly not is the cause of the sin, but neither is the sinner. How can a sinner cause a nonbeing or privation?

Leibniz closes the passage by saying, "And it surprises me that the profound Descartes stumbled here too".[20] As shown by his comments on the *Principles of Philosophy*, Leibniz thinks that Descartes has adopted this unrealistic picture of divine concurrence. In the *Principles* Descartes says our free will allows us to "withhold our assent in

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[18] A.VI.i 544-545
[19] Ibid. 545
[20] Ibid.

doubtful matters and thus avoid error".[21] Leibniz's objection is that free will isn't a cognitive power of agreeing or disagreeing, but a power to perform actions.[22] Likewise, when Descartes distinguishes the intellect from the will and imputes sinning to the latter, Leibniz contradicts him.[23] As we have seen, free will for Leibniz involves the intellectual power of judging a course of action and then acting upon it (or choosing not to act). Therefore it involves both the intellect and the will. In Descartes, freedom of the will is merely a function of assenting or dissenting to a course of action. However Leibniz believes that this conception of freedom of the will isn't strong enough to counteract God's determinism because when we assent we're concurring with God and it's unclear what happens when we dissent. Although this explanation is sufficient to explain Leibniz's remark, I will delay further discussing notions of concurrence until a later section.

Leibniz then turns to discussing a flawed theory of the will. Its error lies in that it seeks to give men freedom of indifference—that is, the freedom to choose between two equal options (think of the Buridan's ass problem). For Leibniz, this is worse than endorsing a senseless theory, because it "removes God from His own nature" as first and last cause in an attempt to preserve his justice.[24] Not only is there no sufficient reason to choose between one thing and the other, which is unacceptable to Leibniz, but it destroys God's foreknowledge. If all things are equal, then God cannot know what the outcome of a choice will be beforehand. Leibniz mentions that Fonseca and Molina tried to resolve this

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[21] CSM I 194 (AT 8A; 6)
[22] G.iv 356
[23] G.iv 361
[24] A.VI.i 545

question by positing a sort of 'middle knowledge' where God intuitively knows what choice will be made, but Leibniz rails against this as well, exclaiming "O blind people!" and claiming that all those scholars did was give a new name to God's knowledge.

In the last substantial section of VdA, Leibniz addresses both of these problems. Leibniz takes us to Ziklag and back, quotes some Vergil, and again chastises us for our fallacy in believing false theories. Although Leibniz is non-necessitarian, he does not believe in middle knowledge, which is a way to preserve God's prescience while allowing for cases of perfect indifference. Essentially, God has an intuition about which option will be chosen in those cases. But Leibniz argues that such a theory curtails God's omniscience, using the example of Ziklag. If some decisions are totally indifferent, *how* can God know what option will be chosen? Either he knows, in which case it is part of his knowledge, or he does not. Middle knowledge assumes there is an intermediate ground between those two options, which seems infeasible.

The example of Ziklag (really Keilah, but Leibniz misnamed it) is tied into both of the sophisms that Leibniz seeks to defeat—concurrence because this conception gives too much power to free will, at the expense of God's character; the lazy reason because it implies that in cases where humans have free will, God cannot know what the outcome of a choice will be beforehand (again conflating predestination with prescience). Although this passage of VdA is opaque in many respects, it seems to show what I've said above: namely, that prescience has no causal role in determining events. God sees all the possibilities and, due to the circumstances in which they arise, can foresee what you will

*freely* choose. Anyone who thinks God's prescience mandates a deterministic universe is making a category mistake.

## Other Aspects of VdA

There are some other notable parts of VdA, all of which will be relevant in later discussions. First of all, the dialogue begins with Leibniz proclaiming grandiosely, "Of all the questions that bewilder [verwirret] the human race, none is pursued with more passion, more often repeated, more dangerously and cruelly pressed than this point of contention: 'how the free will of man, punishment, and reward can exist, given the omnipotence and omniscience of an all-ruling God'".[25] Leibniz believes that the problem has been exacerbated by the use of near-meaningless labels and pledges to use the German language in order to banish "philosophical chimeras".[26] This is one of VdA's ironic moments, both because Leibniz himself seems to abandon the purity of German in order to talk in the language of chimeras and because the text is, unlike the usual Leibniz, very flowery and verbose. However, I think it is perhaps more surprising that Leibniz tried to philosophize in German than that he ultimately abandoned the idea, due to his eirenical nature. As an eclectic who enjoyed the idea of reconciliation, he was already aware that adopting a people's language helped to smooth the path (consider his thoughts on substantial forms).

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[25] A.VI.i 537
[26] Ibid. 538

Sections three through five offer some of Leibniz's positive views as well as hints as to his motivations. First, Leibniz believes that God is just and distributes punishments and rewards fairly, "as it were according to musical rules".[27] Perhaps it appears in this life that this is not so, but Leibniz reminds the reader that this life isn't all there is, and that the gifts of this lifetime are trivial when compared with the gifts of the next. Secondly, Leibniz alludes to the dread Turkish "chain of...unavoidable necessity", which is the strong determinism that he wants desperately to avoid.[28] Lastly, Leibniz mentions the Manichaeans and the Pelagians, two groups which he will rail against in the *Theodicy*, though the passage here is nearly incoherent and serves mainly to advance his argument that labels are confusing.

I will retread the lazy reason objection, mostly to point out some theologically-inclined remarks. In an uncharacteristically invective-laden passage, Leibniz calls his audience fools "destined to poverty and...negligence" and demands that they "pay attention".[29] Leibniz lays out a succinct view of sin and human responsibility. In VdA, "sin is found only in the will", and an evil will deserves punishment.[30] This means that "someone asleep or drunk does not sin where there is no will"; moreover, it implies that if there is a will but no corresponding action, there is still sin.[31] Although this is a strict definition of sin, it does mean that the sinner has strong control over whether he sins. Moreover, this view stresses human responsibility. Even when Leibniz imagines his interlocutor asking, "Why didn't God make me better so that I don't sin at all?", he counters with, "here I am

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[27] Ibid. 537
[28] Ibid.
[29] A.VI.i 542
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

not obliged to answer you; it is enough that you did not want to give up your sinning and take responsibility for your salvation".[32] Although such posturing could be interpreted as deflecting, as Leibniz covering up the fact that he can't answer the question, I think we can be charitable here. Leibniz's aim is to unmask the falsehoods that ordinary people believe, and thus far he has delved into philosophy only to defeat those falsehoods. Giving a complicated answer (which the question would surely demand) would just derail him from his task (and perhaps he intended to give one later on in the dialogue). At this point, he hasn't exorcised all the demons from his audience's mind; moreover, he has already hinted at an answer to this question in section three, where he says that the idea of a benevolent God is compatible with less-than-perfect humans.

However, in the next section he relaxes this strong stance by saying, "nevertheless, the wisdom of God must still be justified" *per se*, even if God doesn't owe an answer to a specific person.[33] Leibniz agrees that God could have "arranged it that the person would never come to will to sin and fall into sin and damnation"; likewise, Leibniz's God does more than spectate—he foresaw all the consequences of our actions and he created the circumstances in which they would occur.[34] Moreover, it seems that after the Biblical fall, God could have started over, creating a new race of men rather than proceeding with the race descended from Adam and Eve. Therefore, there is a significant worry that God is responsible for sin. Leibniz summarizes the worry:

> (a) He who knowingly permits sin, creates all the opportunities for sin, and brings it about that the agent can do it, indeed, provokes the will of the agent

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[32] Ibid.
[33] A.VI.i 542
[34] Ibid.

itself, and brings it about that he wants to do it—while he nevertheless could hinder the sin, indeed, could refrain from creating the opportunities and provoking the will—is to be considered the author of sin.

(b) God does such a thing, as has been shown.

(c) Therefore he is to be considered the author of sin.

However, Leibniz addresses this with the use of some *a posteriori* facts. Because sins exist in the world, God must believe that it is better that they exist. God's wisdom determines that he wills the best; thus, a world with sin must be the best. But the case is in fact stronger than that—God gives humans the ability to sin, and created the particular circumstances in which each sin occurs. So far this account is very general and could be imputed to the entire tradition of Christian evil theorists. Essentially the problem is how to understand God's participation in human actions. Giving too much power to God prevents a world in which humans have significant free will and moves towards an occasionalist picture; giving too little power to God undermines the conception of God. But sense must be made of the fact that God does provide humans with the ability and circumstances of sin while pinning the blame for sin on the sinner rather than on God. It should also be clear that, given that God wills the best and that sins exist, sins must somehow contribute to the bestness of the world; otherwise, the world instantiated would be sinless. This notion is usually called 'evil as a means'—the idea that evil in itself is bad, but that the work it does in the world is necessary and, in some sense, good.

Thus there seem to be certain ideas at work in VdA, even if Leibniz doesn't present views *per se*. Leibniz's critique of historical theories, and his work with necessity and possibility, boils down to one desire: balancing God's power and human freedom. Any theory that does not achieve that perfect balance point, where we have significant free will but God's character is preserved, must be scrapped. There is an additional idea that could count as a positive view, but at the very least marks out what Leibniz sees as a necessary criterion for any theory of evil—the idea that evil is a means to a greater good (also called the greater good defense). Leibniz believes it is a fact known through experience that sins exist. Thus, God must have wanted sins to exist. Because God is wise, he wills the best, so the actual world must be the best. Therefore, the world's sins must contribute to its bestness. In such a scenario, evil is used as a means to obtaining a greater good, and, like the saying 'the end justifies the means', its existence becomes excusable. In fact this general picture of evil is at work in many historical theories, because there is no better way to explain the existence of evil. However, given that Leibniz does not elucidate a full theory of evil in VdA, it's unclear exactly how he intends the idea of evil as a means to be used.

## Connections to Other Early Writings

Before turning to the *Confessio* and the work of Leibniz scholars, I'd like to talk about VdA's relationship with a couple of other early works on evil. I have already noted the similarities between VdA and 'L'auteur du peché' in passing, but I want to make it explicit. Other important reiterations include a passage on middle knowledge and some

passing remarks about free will and evil. Unfortunately, the dating of these early fragments is not reliable, despite the Sleigh volume and the German editions providing reasonable best guesses—thus, it is nearly impossible to know whether, for instance, the statements on the author of sin and middle knowledge made in Latin and French are scraps of material for VdA or aspects taken from VdA and written up in Leibniz's preferred languages. However, all of the pieces collected in the Yale *Confessio* volume are worthwhile; for instance, a quote from the Wedderkopf Letter supports the VdA conception of free will:[35]

> Fate is the decree of God or the necessity of events. Fatal things are those that will necessarily happen. God either does not decree concerning everything, or, if he does decree concerning everything, then he is the author of absolutely everything.

This quote and the subsequent discussion demonstrate Leibniz's keen awareness that God must be prescient without taking away free will, and yet somehow God must be absolved of responsibility for sin. As we know from VdA, Leibniz settles on the view that God doesn't decree concerning everything but he still knows it.[36] Furthermore, later on in this letter Leibniz echoes his words in VdA that because "God wills the things he perceives to be the best and, likewise, the most harmonious", God must have some motivation for creating sin (or, minimally, allowing it to exist).[37] Thus, Leibniz concludes that "nothing is to be considered absolutely evil", because absolute evil's existence would bring into question either God's benevolence or his power.[38] Although sins are evil to the sinner,

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[35] A.II.i 117
[36] Argued for in previous sections.
[37] A.II.i 117
[38] Ibid. 118

"taken together with punishment or atonement, sins are good" (in the sense of being harmonious).[39] So again, we see Leibniz reasoning that, God being God and it being evident that sins do exist, the only consistent explanation is some form of the greater good defense.

Most of the other works in the Yale volume are clearly connected with the *Confessio's* ideas about free will and evil, but still contain useful quotes that show that Leibniz is ruminating on the ideas in VdA and expounding them further. However, we don't know—and can't know—whether the *Confessio's* relationship with VdA is one that demonstrates the evolution of some of the concepts in VdA, one that rejects those concepts, or one that refines them. In the next section I argue that the evidence is inconclusive due to the short length of VdA, the fact that some of the content discussed in one work is not discussed in the other, and lastly, because of the brute stylistic differences between a work written as a dialogue between a philosopher and a theologian and a work written in the style of VdA. ('Polemical sermon' or 'apology in the sense of *apologia*' come to mind due to the strength of Leibniz's rhetoric). The relevant point here is that the works written in the same period as VdA and/or the *Confessio* do nothing to add or subtract from my view. Although Leibniz's historical rejections remain consistent (and in fact, both 'L'auteur du peché' and 'Scientia media' are a good deal more coherent than VdA), *one cannot base any plausible claims about the evolution of Leibniz's view on two stable rejections*. Had Leibniz written a piece that showed he had 'seen the light' and 'embraced middle knowledge' with open arms, which led to a detailed exposition of a view supporting middle knowledge in the *Confessio*, the narrative might be more clear.

[39] Ibid.

But unfortunately, we cannot be inside Leibniz's mind and the dates that we have for some of the texts are subjective.

Before wrapping up this section I would like to point out two obvious connections to VdA. Both are important in Leibniz's development because they will be important to the late Leibniz. In 'L'auteur du peché', Leibniz reintroduces the problem of the author of sin, saying that in order to avoid the idea that God is the author of sin, some thinkers have taken up privation theory. If sin is a privation, then God, because he is not the author of privations, is not the author of sin. Another way to put the thesis is by saying that God is responsible for the physical aspect, not the moral aspect (where the moral aspect is understood as an *anomie*, a lawlessness). Leibniz calls this strategy "a manifest illusion...a leftover from the visionary philosophy of the past" and "a subterfuge with which a reasonable person will never be satisfied".[40] To explicate his objection he uses the example of a painter. The painter paints two identical paintings, but one is a miniature and the other is not. According to this theory, the miniature's positive features—the colors, lines, etc—are the responsibility of the painter, but "its privative aspect", the diminishment with respect to the larger painting, is not.[41] To say this is ridiculous. As Leibniz says, "the privation is nothing but a simple result or infallible consequence of the positive aspect, without requiring a separate author".[42] Moreover, if privation *really* has no author, then how can man be held responsible for sin? Man cannot be the sole architect of the positive aspects of sin, so even if one holds that the same agent must be

[40] A.VI.iii 150-151
[41] A.VI.iii 151
[42] Ibid.

responsible for the positive and privative aspects, it cannot be man. Thus Leibniz concludes that this theory is incoherent and fails to provide the desired conclusion.

The bad musician example from VdA and the painter example from this text are very similar, although the bad musician is easier to explain. Furthermore, Leibniz makes the same move in 'L'auteur' as he did in VdA, saying, "Indeed, I do not see why one holds the sinner himself to be a cause of sin; he does the deed...and who can do anything about the fact that this deed is not in harmony with the love of God?"[43] This theory, which he calls 'privation theory', is what I will call 'separation theory' in order to distinguish it from a different type of privation theory that will be introduced shortly. Leibniz has much disdain for this theory, going so far as to call its conclusions "a joke",[44] "unsound" and "lame".[45] However, 'L'auteur' does make the character of separation theory clearer, hammering home Leibniz's points on the matter.

Likewise, 'Scientia media' takes up and then dismisses the possibility of middle knowledge. However, this is a case where Leibniz is much clearer in his justifications. He is much more adamant that "nothing exists without a reason", which he says has application in "[ending] many controversies in metaphysics" (including, of course, this mistaken conception of freedom).[46] If such is the case, then middle knowledge is impossible, because "the will cannot choose between two objects unless the goodness of

[43] A.VI.i 544-545
[44] A.VI.iii 151
[45] A.VI.i 544
[46] A.VI.iv 1373

one of them is greater".[47] Ergo, if a man were confronted with two absolutely equal-seeming options he would be unable to decide between them and forced to reserve judgment until the reasons for picking one or the other became more apparent.

Though neither of these texts introduce new concepts, they certainly expand upon the hurried arguments in VdA and show that Leibniz is, if nothing else, systematically testing his objections by examining their metaphysical underpinnings. Thus, from the particular objection to middle knowledge we see his adherence to the PSR, and from his objection to separation theory we see that he is inclined to espouse a version of the greater good defense. Moreover, it appears that on subsequent revisits to the topic in general, his writing became sharper, which will culminate in his book on evil, the *Theodicy*.

To conclude this section and previous sections, I want to summarize what I have already done. I have extracted some definitions from VdA which allowed me to posit a tentative conception of free will. After noting the objections to privation theory and middle knowledge which were further developed in subsequent texts, I also introduced the conception of 'separation theory' as a type of privation theory. Moreover, there were some other aspects of VdA that were noteworthy, such as Leibniz's appeal to the greater good defense, his idea that sins do exist in the world, and his objection to the lazy reason. I also briefly discussed the idea of what *evolutionary* conclusions we can draw from VdA, saying that it is conjecture to make any strong conclusions about its relationship with the *Confessio* and other early works on evil. This point will be taken up in the next section; several others will be explicated later on.

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[47] Ibid. 1374

## The *Confessio* and Scholarly Interpretations

It is now time to look at scholarly interpretations of VdA. I intend not only to put these views on the table, but to use them against each other in order to examine whether the view presented in the *Confessio* differs significantly from that of VdA. Ultimately, though I deny all of their interpretations, there are points of value to be taken from all the scholars who have taken the time to discuss this topic.

Sleigh's view is the easiest to discuss, although certain aspects of it have to wait until I discuss the shift in Leibniz's thought that occurs in the 1680s. At both points this will seem a bit unfair to Sleigh, because his view is no different than the view held by many others; however, he is the only one who seems to have written it down (both in his introduction to the Yale volume and in a couple of articles). Thus he is my exemplar for this line of thought, which assumes that VdA and the *Confessio* explicate a continuous position. That being said, however, no one appears to have contradicted his interpretations. Part of the problem stems from the fact that Leibniz's work on evil is rather neglected. As I said previously, the *Theodicy* is generally thought of as a quotation mine; however, it has only been recently that studying Leibniz's early works has become popular. Thus, in general even works that seem to directly involve the problem of evil, such as Robert Adams' famous book *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (a book in which two of the three main topics directly engage with evil), seem to skirt around the topic when there is much to be gained from considering it.

But back to Sleigh. In 'Leibniz's First Theodicy' Sleigh is specifically addressing the *Confessio philosophi*. The article title might lead one to think that Sleigh is discussing the relationship between the *Confessio* and the *Theodicy*, the word 'theodicy' which was coined by Leibniz for his eponymous book, or something similar. However, as Sleigh writes:

> The central thesis of the paper is that Leibniz formulated a solution to the author of sin problem in the *Confessio* that he came to believe to be inadequate and that recouping his losses subsequently involved him in tangled metaphysical considerations...I have no more than moderate confidence in this thesis.[48]

I too have no more than moderate confidence in this thesis, but objections to Sleigh's analysis of Leibniz's development must be saved for the next section. What is relevant right now is Sleigh's verdict on VdA, which he encapsulates in one paragraph:

> By the close of paragraph 19...Leibniz believed that he had dispensed with the leading moves of his predecessors concerning the problem of the author of sin. We might expect Leibniz's positive contribution to be located in section 20, the last section of the work.[49]

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[48] Sleigh 481
[49] Ibid. 486

Instead Sleigh quotes the final three words of the work and concludes that "the positive solution [to the problems posed by VdA] was the work of the *Confessio*" rather than something that Leibniz presented in VdA itself.[50]

Sleigh's analysis of VdA does good historical work. It highlights the connection to Molina, a late Scholastic, through Leibniz's rejection of middle knowledge. As Sleigh says, "Leibniz therein rejected this solution [Molina's libertarian account] for three reasons"—the first two were standard reasons given by Molina's own critics; the third stemmed from his own commitment to "a theory of causal determinism and compatibilism" which was inconsistent with Molina's libertarianism.[51] His account also traces the roots of privation theory and deems it a Thomastic/Augustianian hybrid by invoking quotations from the *Summa*.[52] However, Sleigh says nothing about the positive work of VdA. In fact, by treating it thus, he implies that there is no 'positive contribution'. Furthermore, treating one work as an aporetic precursor to the other's positive contributions makes them a package deal. While it *could* be the case that the *Confessio* and VdA are part of a set of compatible works that Leibniz wrote on the problem of evil (which at least some of the other works such as his pieces on middle knowledge and the author of sin seem to suggest), it should be clear by now that I think there is a lot of material in VdA, especially relative to its size. Sleigh has just assumed that the positions in the two works are compatible.

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[50] Sleigh 486

[51] Ibid. 484

[52] Medieval philosophers may want to underscore the fact that both philosophers have differing accounts of evil and free will, but for our purposes it is only important to recognize the theory and its roots as Leibniz perceived it.

By contrast, Rateau's account goes in the other direction. He thinks there is much to be found in VdA. Though he concedes that the majority of the interest in VdA lies in its treatment of traditional solutions, he adds that the text acknowledges the difficulties posed by rational theology.[53] That is, in explaining God's justice, one must explain how an omnipotent and omniscient God nonetheless leaves a metaphysical space for human free will. For Rateau, the importance of the project of rationalizing theology cannot be understated, since he believes that Leibniz worked towards giving a rationalized account all his life. However, he supplements his consideration of the material with outside evidence, which leads him to draw conclusions that I see as lacking in the text.

For Rateau, VdA and the *Confessio* are very far apart indeed; VdA is "more necessitarian" than the *Confessio* due to the greater influence on Leibniz of Luther and Hobbes. Although it is true that Leibniz was (at least nominally) Lutheran and that he was influenced by Hobbes at this time, Rateau makes this point without explicating the 'necessiatarianism' of VdA and his only evidence for the influence of Luther and Hobbes is the fact that both men lambasted the historical positions objected to in VdA. Now, even though the enemy of my enemy is my friend, that doesn't mean that you and the enemy of your enemy share the same positive philosophy, and for someone whose analysis of VdA's positive content is so rich and worthwhile, it's a disappointment for Rateau to conclude his account as he does. While it could be the case that Rateau has studied Luther and Hobbes in depth and thus has more reasons for tracing out this line of influence, then my criticism would be that he has not illuminated these reasons for the uninformed reader (in this case, me).

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[53] Rateau 104

Thus, there is no doubt that the *Confessio* is an *expansion* of the material of VdA—the question is whether there are significant incompatibilities between the two works. My answer on this may be unsatisfactory, but I think it ultimately the most prudent: we just don't, and can't know. VdA is too short; the more assumptions we make about its background metaphysics, the less objective our interpretation will become. This is why I think Rateau goes too far.

For instance, consider this sketch of the similarity between the two. The *Confessio's* main view is that God wills the best. Being the cause of all things, God wills a certain series of events into existence. However, he could have willed a different series into existence. Thus, the world is non-necessitarian and we are free.[54] It can be extrapolated from Leibniz's remarks in VdA that we exercise free will in cases with sufficient rational causes. Moreover, Leibniz relies heavily on the existence of a chain of causes that extends back to God and contains justifications for all actual things. However, should be go even further and assume that a 'chain of causes' is similar to the 'series of events' enacted by God in the *Confessio*?

On the one hand, a significant case could be made for reading this view into VdA—Leibniz doesn't want to destroy the chain of causes from God, and given that all causes must be sufficient and rational, we could make the case that Sleigh makes for the *Confessio*. God can only will the best, so if God exists, then the actual series of things is tied to God's existence. Constrained to will the best, God effectively must actualize one

[54] Explained at A.VI.iii 126.

specific series of events. Thus, due to contextual constraints rather than logical necessity, the series of events that exists, exists necessarily. Therefore, the *Confessio* picture is necessitarian, and his recourse to *per se* necessity (that is, that considered in itself, without God, the actual series of things isn't necessary) just isn't satisfying. It's like saying that being born to an abusive mother doesn't necessarily dictate the course of your life, because considered *per se*, your life has many possibilities. However, *nothing* can change the fact that every person who is born must have a mother, and yours is abusive.

On the other hand, speculation can carry us far away from the content of VdA. Hence my instinct is to say that VdA's content is *compatible* with that of the *Confessio*; you can find many parallels between the two positions, but the *Confessio's* has richer, more developed views. You can even accept this for two incompatible reasons: either because you believe that Leibniz recognized the paucity of his original account and decided to embellish it, or because you believe that had Leibniz continued writing VdA, he would have included the essence of what was in the *Confessio*. Thus, my position on the matter remains skeptical until someone who has looked at the material of both texts can make a careful and solid argument for one of those conclusions. Personally I don't believe that there is enough textual evidence to do this, but I could be proven wrong. We just don't know at this point if the *Confessio's* views are an explication of VdA, an evolution of VdA, or a moving-on from VdA.

Davidson's analysis, although short, is very important. Davidson examines the views of VdA and the *Confessio* en route to determining whether Leibniz changed his mind

between this period and the *Theodicy* on the issue of human free will. Davidson finds connections between all three works, but laments the loss of the candid thinker of the early period while simultaneously noting the disappearance of one of the confusing aspects of the early works, the evil will. Davidson claims that "Leibniz rejects any account of free will according to which acts of willing lack sufficient causes".[55] It is true that Leibniz skirts this in section nineteen ("they say that free will is a certain power of a rational creature such that it can will this or that without any cause").[56] However, Davidson should have recognized that Leibniz was bound in this case by his own principle of rationality: a sufficient cause must have a *sufficient reason*. Moreover, from his talk in earlier sections and his eagerness to separate causation from foreknowledge, it seems that Leibniz believes free will only to be exercised in cases of sufficient rationality (hence why a drunk or sleeping person cannot sin).[57] As such, Leibniz must reject the entire category of cases where there isn't a sufficient reason to act one way or another, most likely by saying that those such situations are impossible or that the person involved must withhold judgment (note that this holds whether the case is purely psychological or not). However, Davidson has a second point, against a claim which he detects both in VdA and the *Confessio*:

(CW): There is always a cause of the will outside the willing subject's will.

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[55] Davidson 22

[56] A.VI.i 545

[57] This is supported by certain passages in 'Scientia media', which Leibniz's line of reasoning is more explicit. (See the above discussion of 'Scientia media').

This point is tied up with his discussion of cases of indifference, but, as Davidson notices, it "puts considerable strain on the claim that what depends on your will is up to you".[58]

Unfortunately, Leibniz is in a tight position here; he cannot respond that the will can act irrationally. Rather, he must say that the will must always act rationally and choose the best, and cases of falling short are due to epistemic failures on the part of the agent. However, if this is the case, it is once again difficult to see how an agent satisfyingly exercises free will, except in cases where the agent fails to choose the best. For when the agent does what is rationally best and has all the cognitive information available to make that choice and chooses freely, his will and God's will desire the same thing. What does the agent add in these cases? Leibniz must say, given his definition of free will, that here the agent's power consists in counterfactually having been able to do otherwise to his own detriment.

Thus, Davidson's final verdict on VdA is that Leibniz's making the will the ultimate source of sin is voluntarist (because an evil will alone deserves punishment) but that his reliance on outside causes for willing is not, an unstable theory which causes Leibniz to go on an intellectualist path in the *Confessio*. As such, he either sees VdA as an early view that Leibniz moved on from, or as a predecessor to the *Confessio's* view which was reworked to deemphasize some troubling aspects. However, Davidson still recognizes that the evil will idea is present in the *Confessio* to some extent. I find Davidson's analysis in this respect to be a nonstarter, since the evil will idea, in some form or another, is present in the *Theodicy*. (This will be discussed in the relevant section).

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[58] Davidson 24

But the merits of Davidson's account are that he is willing to consider VdA in its own right and that he doesn't extrapolate too strong a view from the evidence he has, which is something that I believe that both Sleigh and Rateau have done. Moreover, despite my belief that there just isn't enough evidence (for me at least) to make a conclusion about the relationship between VdA and the *Confessio*, Davidson does extract an interesting definition of free will from the *Confessio*:

> (FC): "A power that can act and not act, all the requisites for acting having been posited, and moreover, all the requisites that exist both outside and inside the agent being equal (A VI 3 132)".[59]

This looks a lot like the definition from VdA:

> (FW): x is done freely iff x can be done or not be done.

The two conditions on the power (that the requisites are in place and that they are equalized) are assumed in VdA; the disjunct between acting and not acting is still present. Davidson goes on to discuss the explicit intellectualism of the *Confessio* and the fact that Leibniz is bound by the principle of sufficient reason. A consequence of that is, as I noted above, that the best thing that one can do is act in accordance with God. Thus, we can safely say that the *Confessio* and VdA have similar definitions of free will. However, unless the underlying metaphysics and modality of VdA are made explicit, it doesn't matter. Leibniz made a habit of reusing old friends, such as the PSR, in new contexts. Perhaps it is just coincidental that both works contain a similar definition of free will.

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[59] Davidson 26

## The 1680s (Historical Privation Theory)

Sleigh's analysis of Leibniz on evil asserts the following: Leibniz formulated a group of "fundamental propositions" at the beginning of his career that stayed with him throughout his life.[60] Though "he never rejected any of them, his views about exactly what theodicean problems they resolved varied significantly over time".[61] These core propositions are:

> (i.) This is the best possible world.
>
> (ii.) Since, in the long term, sin is harmful only to the sinner, it is not absolutely evil.
>
> (iii.) Whoever has an evil will deserves punishment, whatever the source of the evil will.
>
> (iv.) The ultimate source of evil is in the divine understanding, not in the divine will.[62]

I disagree with Sleigh's interpretation for several reasons. First of all, holding this view biases him towards the idea that Leibniz's development occurs mostly in the early period. Thus his implicit interpretation of the *Theodicy* suggests that all Leibniz is doing in that late work is reapplying fully developed theses to different areas of the problem of evil. Secondly, the notion that Leibniz used these propositions for radically different things in

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[60] Kremer 166. 'Kremer' refers to the volume in which this paper can be found. Because it is an overview of Leibniz's treatment of the problem of evil, this is my go-to paper for citations involving Sleigh's view of Leibniz's development, despite similar quotes populating his other works.

[61] Ibid. 166-167.

[62] Ibid. 166

itself implies that they changed over time. Thirdly, even if the words of the propositions themselves don't change, their context and meaning *does*—that is, even if Leibniz holds some variant of (i) in both the *Confessio* and *Theodicy* periods, affirming (i) in the *Confessio* period amounts to nothing more than a platitude about the goodness and excellence of God, whereas affirming it in the *Theodicy* period alludes to a well-developed theological modal logic.[63] By 1710, the term 'best possible world' has gained new meaning; it is a technical term rather than a mere idea. Finally, Sleigh expresses his belief that Leibniz's reevaluation of privation theory, along with "a theory of concurrence between created agent and God in the production of a creaturely action", allows him to formulate the *Theodicy's* account of evil. If this is the case, then it is questionable how much work the four above propositions do on their own—(ii) and (iii) at least seem like perfunctory results rather than heavy metaphysical lifters, and (iv) explains how God can be benevolent and still allow evil. As such, it is central to explaining the resolution of a just God and an unjust world, but it doesn't bear the brunt of Leibniz's explanation. Although this is anticipating my discussion of the *Theodicy*, what I mean is that (ii) and (iii) are not essential to Leibniz's solution to the problem of evil in that book; likewise, (iv) is an instrumental part of his theory but becomes meaningless without the support of concurrence, privation, and some metaphysical theses such as the idea that the divine intellect contains the eternal verities.[64]

Even acknowledging the importance of Leibniz's formulation of privation theory and a theory of concurrence sophisticated enough to explain evil, Sleigh's view is that the seeds

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[63] A similar split could be made between *Confessio* (iv.) and *Theodicy* (iv.).
[64] Presented in Book One, Section 42.

of their development happen in the 1680s—papers such as 'De libertate, fato, gratia dei' show Leibniz's changing stance on privation theory, and concurrence theory is developed as part of his discussions of necessity. Thus, even though it looks as though those important parts of the *Theodicy* are developed for the *Theodicy*, they were not. One might feel that this is correct: that the *Theodicy*, one of the only works Leibniz published in his lifetime, was populated with 'safe' theories screened in advanced by acute minds. One might even kindly say that this is the culmination of a life's work. But in an era in which it has been acknowledged that the *Theodicy* is more than a citation reservoir for scholars who are interested in other things, and when scholars are turning their attention to the *Theodicy* as a work of philosophy in its own right, I think it is *necessary* to find a different interpretation of Leibniz's development.

However, we must start in the 1680s by understanding where Leibniz is coming from. Sleigh aptly points out the main problem of the *Confessio*, which I have alluded to earlier:

> (1) The series of things, W, is necessarily enacted. (God can (debatably) choose to create W or not to create W, but he is bound, if he creates, to create W). "If God is taken away, so is the entire series of things, and if God is posited, so is the entire series of things." [65]
>
> (2) Evils exist as a means to obtain the best possible series, that is, W. "Whatever exists has a sufficient reason for existing";[66] "sins occur to bring forth a universal

[65] A VI.iii 121
[66] Ibid. 118

harmony of things".[67] Leibniz has already defined harmony as a unity in multiplicity, some parts of which are not pleasing on their own, but which whole is pleasing.

(3) Evils exist in W. This Leibniz takes as truth from empirical evidence.

(4) The evils existing in W are pre-determined (since changing the evils would change the series of things). "The sins included in this total series of things" (that is, the one that was enacted) "are due to the ideas themselves of things, i.e., to the existence of God. In positing this, they are posited; this being taken away, so are they".[68]

(5) God exists. Again, a necessary truth; Leibniz refers to "the demonstration of the existence of God" as crucial in helping his arguments here. And whatever we think of Leibniz's actual beliefs, this is a truth in all his writings.[69]

(C) *Each* particular evil in W is willed by God. (Ergo, each particular evil is necessary).

Given that God and the series of things are bound together, so that in changing one the other changes, it is *impossible* to have a different series of things. If so, even if God is using evil as a means to obtain the best series, it's not just that God is hand-waving and allowing some evils into the world the way a boss might excuse a few late arrivals spread out over a year of work. If said boss actually knew the reason for the late arrivals, their dates and times, and how many there would be, would he be as quick to permit them? Even if you try to wiggle out of this example by saying, "Well what if this guy—call him

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[67] Ibid. 122
[68] Ibid. 124
[69] Ibid. 120

Joe—is an exemplary employee and the boss needs him to have the best company possible, even if he's late a few times", you're still stuck with the conclusion that those absences are 'necessary', both in the traditional sense (they follow from a necessary thing) and in the sense that the boss *permits* them. Trying to get around this by saying, as Leibniz does, that the late arrivals aren't necessary when considered of themselves, but only when considered in a greater context, is a weak solution. Thus I agree with Sleigh that Leibniz realized the indefensibility of the *Confessio* and was forced to move on. The question is, "*How* did he move on?"

Sleigh's answer is simple: Leibniz changed his mind about privation theory in the 1680s. In different terms: "ridicule was not Leibniz's last word on privation theory",[70] "Leibniz was forced thereby to concoct his own complicated version of privation theory",[71] and finally, "in his mature treatments of the problem of the author of sin Leibniz took refuge in his own version of privation theory—the theory versions of which were lampooned in [VdA and 'L'auteur']".[72] The passage that Sleigh cites is from 'De libertate', where Leibniz says the following:

> It seems illusory to say that God concurs in the matter of sin, but not in the formal aspect, which is a privation or anomie. But one should know that this response is more solid than it seems at first glance, for every privation consists in imperfection, and imperfection, in limitation".[73]

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[70] Kremer 170
[71] Ibid. 176
[72] Kremer 178
[73] A VI.iv 1605

This passage does espouse a version of privation theory. However, I don't believe it is the same version as the one that Leibniz rejects in his early writings. Leibniz endorses a type of privation theory, imperfection theory, that differs from the separation theory found, for instance, in Augustine. Thus, Sleigh and I agree that the thesis that each creature's privative imperfection is the source of its evil and sin, is "central" both to Leibniz's contribution to the problem of evil, and to the theory of evil in the *Theodicy*.[74] However, we disagree about the characterization of such a thesis. It is up to me to illuminate the difference. In short, both theories involve a division of causal labor, meant to impute moral responsibility to the creature rather than to God (or any other outside force). However, the difference is rooted in an internal/external dichotomy which turns out to be key: Separation theory, unlike imperfection theory, can *never* provide an adequate theory of concurrence, and thus, an adequate theory of evil.

To reestablish separation theory, consider the following quotes:

> (S1) Sin is a nothing, consisting in a lack of appropriate perfection, which God does not cause. God is responsible for all the positive aspects of sin, none of the negative.[75]
>
> (S2) It is commonly believed...that sin in its essence is nothing but a pure privation without any reality, and God is not the author of privations.[76]

These both summarize separation theory. However, Leibniz launches two explicatory counterexamples:

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[74] Kremer 179
[75] Paraphrased from VdA (A VI.i 544-545).
[76] A VI.iii 150

(C1) A bad musician is only the cause of the violin bowings and drumbeats and not the resulting dissonance…such an imperfection or dissonance is a nonbeing, a negative thing in which no concurrence…takes place.[77]

(C2) Under this theory, a painter who paints one large painting and a miniature of the same would be the author of everything real and positive in the paintings, but not of its privative aspect (that is, of the small painting's disproportion to the larger one).[78]

The counterexamples show the same root objection: whoever is the author of the positive aspects cannot help but author the negative ones. It is like saying the baker is responsible for the shape of a donut and all of its positive aspects, but not the hole in the middle of the donut. In other words, it is as ridiculous as Leibniz makes it out to be. In his book, Paul Rateau launches a similar objection to Sleigh's interpretation. First of all, the 'evil' which impedes God is *not* nothing: "il est bien quelque chose: une créature".[79] That is, under separation theory, God is prevented from doing what he would do *not* by a nothingness, but by the actions of a creature. Therefore, the title of 'privation theory' rings hollow. Even more unfortunate, if that is so, then it seems that some of God's creations have the power to contradict God's wishes. This may bring us right back to objections about God's power. Another problem with this characterization of evil is that God's concurrence seems total in this picture; there is no space for human liberty or indeed human action at all. (Thus, there is no concurrence, just God acting, with the human adding nothing, not even the power of resistance to God's actions). As Rateau puts

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[77] A VI.i 545
[78] A VI.iii 151
[79] Rateau 245

it, "si Dieu fait le physique du péché, il est également l'auteur du moral".[80] If separation theory is right, then we are just God's puppets and we definitely don't have free choice. This is anathema to Leibniz given his commitments to reason, human action, and God's benevolence.

Finally, there is an inherent inconsistency between Sleigh's insistence that Leibniz later adopts this type of privation theory and Sleigh's assertion that the *Confessio* suffers from causal underperformance. The concurrence problem in the *Confessio*, as Sleigh points out, is twofold. Leibniz holds that each state of affairs owes its existence to causation via the understanding or causation via the will, but *only* those states caused by the will are 'authored' by God. Lastly, sins are not caused to obtain by the divine will.[81] However, 'causation by divine understanding' literally means that if God exists, then a state of affairs α obtains. This actualization, moreover, is necessary if God exists. If that is the case, and we understand the notion of 'willing' as 'delighting in', then not only can every state of affairs be traced back to God's understanding, but the difference between willing and permitting is merely that God is somehow 'delighted' by certain states of affairs. Though this does show that God neither wills nor takes delight in sin, these notions of causation are terribly similar. What does it mean for an eternal, omniscient and omnipotent being to 'delight in' a state of affairs? And even if Sleigh's reconstruction of the *Confessio* is faulty, can one find more plausible or clearer definitions of the modes of divine causation? Thus, in the Confessio, as in separation theory, God's power seems to block the possibility of concurrence or any way to make sense of human free will.

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[80] Rateau 246
[81] Taken from Kremer 177.

Because Leibniz recognized this problem in separation theory as early as VdA and wrote about it several times, it seems odd that he would turn to it after the *Confessio* despite being aware of its problematic picture of concurrence.

It is for these reasons that I believe alongside Rateau that "sans abandoner…l'idée d'une non-séparation du reel et de sa privation, [Leibniz] va proposer une nouvelle doctrine du concours, dans laquelle tout l'acte viendra de Dieu et toute son imperfection de la créature, limitée originairement".[82] The root of Rateau's critique is the following: in a picture in which evil is nothingness and God isn't responsible at all for its existence, how can evil have any causal powers? Even worse, how can humans possibly be held responsible if God is a domineering causal presence and nothingness picks up the slack? This is the heart of Leibniz's objections: this portrayal of evil appears to be *external* to both God and creatures. Moreover, it seems unrealistic because *creatures* perform the evil acts, thus allowing evil to exist. *Creatures* get in the way of God's maximum perfection, not nothing. However, because according to separation theory the responsibility for the positive and the privative seem to go together, humans can't be responsible for the privative because there is no way without God's help for them to be responsible for the positive.

Imperfection theory improves on separation theory in one simple way: it changes 'privation' from a general nothingness or unreality to a defect *inside a creature*. God remains perfectly good, but creatures cannot receive their full share of God's goodness. Creatures' internal privations are called 'defects', or 'original limitations'. These privations

[82] Rateau 247

cause creatures to sin; thus sin exists at large, and each individual sin can be blamed on some creature. A much better analogy, which illustrates the differences between separation theory and imperfection theory, is that of the 'means to an end'—just as an artist might use shadows which would be distasteful on their own to enhance the overall look of a painting, God uses evil to improve the goodness of the world.[83] In shifting to adopt this viewpoint, Leibniz has removed the elements that plague the *Confessio's* picture of divine causation. However, the good parts (that God's understanding and not his will is the cause of sin, that God permits evil but does not delight in it, that God uses evil as a means) are retained. This picture—the *Theodicy* picture—preserves God's causal responsibility for the world while leaving a space for human moral responsibility and free will. Moreover, it constitutes an optimization of the greater good defense by calibrating it with a plausible picture of just how privation of goodness leads to evil. We have seen Leibniz committed to the greater good defense from the beginning, as well as a balanced picture of divine power and human will. In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz believes he has found the answer to all his desiderata, and, in a way, he has. But of course, the *Theodicy's* view is as flawed as the *Confessio's* in some ways.

However, this is getting ahead of ourselves. I want to add a brief addendum about comparative theories of evil to this section in order to flesh out my distinction between separation and imperfection theory with examples. We have already seen that Augustine and (arguably) one version of Aquinas are in the separation theory camp. I intend to introduce some shorter and sweeter theories to unpack, such as those of Plotinus and

[83] The 'means to an end' defense is Leibniz's own in the *Theodicy*, though he uses a different example.

Descartes. A further strength of this approach is that the weaknesses of both types of theories will soon become evident.

Leibniz scholars may not know or care about the Platonic influence on his philosophical works. Christia Mercer has written a book in which she proved, among other things, that Leibniz would have had contact with such ideas through several of his teachers, including Thomasius. However, Mercer's book neglects the problem of evil, doesn't show the impact of Platonism on Leibniz's later works, and doesn't make any textual parallels. Thus I ask the reader to keep an open mind as I expound the roots of the theodicean tradition.

In 'On Evils' Plotinus claims that matter is absolute evil, "a sort of...nonexistence".[84] For Plotinus the living being is a mixture of pure matter and the intellectual soul, which creates a body when it interacts with matter. The soul then must care for the body and risks being confronted with evils during its guardianship. However, Plotinus claims that evils are the means to a greater good, saying, "if [evils] did not exist the All would be imperfect...most of them, even all of them, contribute something useful to the Whole".[85] By posing such a conception, "Plotinus gets away with a paradoxical combination of dualistic and monistic ideas".[86] Although absolute evil exists, it has very little power. It is not a second Principle which opposes the Good; in fact it is so weak so as to not even exist without the One. Evil cannot affect anything higher in the hierarchy of the cosmos than the soul, and even then it does not affect all of them, and the soul can escape. It is

[84] I.8[51]3
[85] II.3[52]18. The language of perfection is that of being 'finished'.
[86] Opsomer 159

"the degree of least possible perfection" in the universe and its good contributions to the universe make it a derisory principle of absolute evil.[87] Thus, Plotinus is able to justify evil's existence, avoid dualism (which is also a Christian desire, for instance Augustine's objections to the Manicheans), and make sense of a creature's free will and capacity for doing evil without demeaning the power of the One (Plotinus' God). Moreover the mixture of the goodness bestowed upon the creature by the One and the evil bestowed upon it due to its composition explain its metaphysical capacity for sin, its original imperfection.

However, original imperfection theories like Plotinus' and Leibniz's are prone to metaphysical objections. These objections are extremely difficult to answer. In Plotinus, queries about what matter is, whether the One generated it, and how the soul and matter create a body are unanswered (or unsatisfactorily answered). Likewise, for Leibniz we can ask questions such as, "Relative to what is a creature imperfect?" "What kind of vessel is a creature?" and "Why can we sin when, for instance, animals and angels cannot?" Moreover Leibniz has other metaphysical considerations, such as his theory of complete concepts, at work which further muddle the issue.

It is debatable whether such objections are better than the other type of objections. I think that Leibniz would believe so, given that the other type of objections either deal with an unrealistic picture of God's nature or of concurrence. Moreover, he might think that both types are better than the Malebranchean answer that God could have created better worlds but is constrained by the simplicity of his laws to create this one. (Along with

[87] Opsomer 159

Malebranche's occasionalist views, this cripples divine power, concurrence, and Leibniz's belief that this world is the best). But before we conclude let me reintroduce the problem of Descartes. While Descartes doesn't exactly give a theodicy (rather, expounding an 'error theory'), his unique theory of evil is definitely worth discussing. For Descartes, the will consists in a withholding of our assent.[88] But this leads to a puny conception of human will.

Descartes believes that humans are "hybrid[s] of being and nothingness".[89] This condition is "the precondition for moral and cognitive lapses"; so, our errors are our responsibility. He also embraces the greater good defense.[90] However, whatever problems there are with Descartes' conception of the will (since he vacillates between the quasi-Augustinian conception that Leibniz ascribes to him and the quasi-Molinist conception that Leibniz also rejects), the greater problem lies in Descartes' conception of God. God is not answerable to logic or reason; sometimes we will just not understand his reasons, not because of our own limitations, but because they are not what we would understand as 'reasons'.[91] Thus, Latzer concludes that "no possible theodicy will be effective"—Descartes, in not systematizing God's justifications, has cut himself off from the greater good defense and thus from a reasonable way of explaining evils.[92] Descartes' God could have created a world without evils, unlike Leibniz's, Malebranche's, or even Plotinus' God, and thus is answerable to the question why he did not.

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[88] CSM I 194 (AT 8A; 6)
[89] Latzer 37
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid. 46
[92] Ibid. 47. Descartes *could* say that the evil is merely phenomenal and doesn't actually exist, but if the point is to avoid trouble from the Church, then that obviously cannot be his recourse.

For now, let us leave aside privation theory and examine some other parts of Leibniz's development in the 1680s.

## 1680s Writings on Evil

In this section I attempt to provide an analysis of some of Leibniz's writings on evil and free will that bridges the period between the *Confessio* and the *Theodicy*. Although the subject of this paper is Leibniz's *Von der Allmacht*, I think it is important not to neglect the 1680s period by clouding it with my own agenda. Sleigh approaches this period only to quote 'De libertate' and muster evidence for his conclusion about Leibniz and privation theory, despite the fact that he has translated some of the major fragments into English. Likewise, Rateau, whose book traces the evolution of Leibniz's thought on evil and culminates in an analysis of the *Theodicy*, barely quotes any texts from this period despite spending an entire chapter on it.

Having read the texts in question, I can definitely say that they are worth examining.[93] It is my hope that including a short analysis here will attract further attention. Many of the texts include notes about the nature of God; for instance, in 'De probanda divina existentia' Leibniz argues against the idea "that Existence is in the concept of the most perfect Being".[94] In 'De libertate et necessitate', a text which is translated in the Ariew and Garber volume, Leibniz revisits his idea about what conception of the will is implied by believing that everything exists for a reason and that there is no such thing as perfect

[93] They will be presented in roughly chronological order (speculative, of course).
[94] A.VI.iv 1390

indifference. Then he endorses a conception of possible and necessary that should sound familiar:

> I hold a concept of possibility and necessity according to which there are some things that are possible, which, nevertheless, are not necessary, and which do not actually exist. From this it follows that a reason that brings it about that one thing exists rather than others, does not lead to necessity, and, accordingly, a reason that always brings it about that a free mind chooses one thing rather than another, whether it arises from the perfection of the thing, as it does in God's case, or from our imperfection, does not eliminate our freedom.[95]

This text goes on to distinguish between absolute and hypothetical necessity, which picks up on a theme in the *Confessio*, but the strategy is exactly the same as the one I employed in my analysis of VdA—that is, of showing that the necessary and possible things don't overlap neatly. Likewise, a similar text, 'De libertate a necessitate in eligendo', tries to work out the objection that, because God foresaw the series of things which he would actualize, he willed that Adam would sin.[96] 'De libertate et gratia' talks about the different aspects of freedom—again objecting to perfect indifference and defending free will as the ability to choose A or B or to suspend judgment.[97] At the end of this piece Leibniz demonstrates that he is still firmly against the idea of separation theory. He claims that men willing to "consider that the idea or concept of a creature...is prior to the decree of the divine will" and furthermore, that the concept was "based on [the divine] intellect", "would see how it is that God produces all the reality in evil actions, and

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[95] A.VI.iv 1444-1449
[96] Ibid. 1450-1455
[97] Ibid. 1455-1460

nevertheless" does not cause evil.[98] This view is quite similar to that of the *Theodicy*, although Leibniz isn't explicit about how God's is responsible for evil actions but not for evil itself. Of course, this idea (separating the divine intellect from the divine will) is also present in the *Confessio*.

In another work, 'De natura veritatis, contingentiae, et indifferentiae atque de libertate et praedeterminatione', Leibniz has an extremely interesting discussion of some of the major points of the *Confessio*, once again alluding to the idea of complete concepts. This work is definitely worth reading for its discussion on necessity, possibility and predetermination, although I cannot do more than highlight that here.[99] In 'De libertate creaturae rationalis', Leibniz once again makes allusions to his rejection of separation theory and middle knowledge. He says, "It cannot be explained how God would not be the cause of sin, if he produced all the reality that is in the most sinful act", and furthermore that "when a man chooses to sin, he is not indifferent immediately before his choice, otherwise the transition to evil must be ascribed not to him, but to God". In this passage he further discusses the premise that indifference cannot directly precede free choice.[100]

The last text I will discuss is 'De libertate, fato, gratia dei' (De libertate). This is the text cited by Sleigh as evidence for Leibniz's acceptance of separation theory (an interpretation against which I have already argued). Unlike some of the other texts, this one has a definite introduction in the style of VdA and the *Theodicy*:

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[98] Ibid.
[99] A.VI.iv 1514-1524
[100] Ibid. 1590-1594

> Among all the questions discussed once providence has been firmly established, none is disseminated more widely among religions and nations, none is more important to human life, than that concerning freedom, fate, and the grace of God, and connected matters.[101]

Leibniz believes that there are two possible approaches to the topic, one from "first principles" and the other from "religion and practical philosophy...reconciled with the principles of speculative philosophy".[102] There is no clearer statement of Leibniz's double-edged method when it comes to theological topics, something which should be remembered in the next section when I discuss the methodological similarities between VdA and the *Theodicy*. That is, he definitely employs both in those texts. In 'De libertate' Leibniz starts from theses that "pious and prudent men accept", laying out several truths about God and theodicy. Leibniz then proceeds to grapple with the problem of divine foreknowledge, alluding to the example of Keilah (mistakenly called Ziklag in VdA, corrected in the *Theodicy*). There are also superficial similarities in tone and style, despite the fact that VdA is a German work, 'De libertate' is Latin, and the *Theodicy* is in French. Therefore, although the theodicean philosophy in 'De libertate' is similar to that of the *Confessio*, its method and style put it squarely in the same category as VdA and the *Theodicy*. If one reads all three and highlights these similarities, one can put together a package of topics that Leibniz tends to discuss when in the practical/speculative style:

(1) The falsity of scholastic beliefs.

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[101] Ibid. 1595-1612
[102] A.VI.iv 1595-1612

(2) Sustained beliefs in the nature of God.

(3) Punishment and reward, including salvation.

(4) Biblical examples.

(5) The lazy reason/the paradox of God's foreknowledge and divine necessity.

Moreover, this is a Leibniz poised on making the breakthroughs that distinguish the *Theodicy* from the *Confessio*, who mentions possible worlds and imperfection theory in the same piece as the series of events and the permission of sin. Finally, the text ends with the story of Pyrrha and Deucalion, just as the *Theodicy* has the famous story of Sextus (a tradition that is decidedly Platonic). (Perhaps VdA was meant to end with a story?)

This concludes our section on the 1680s. To summarize what I've done, I have discussed the major scholarly interpretations of VdA and its relationship with the *Confessio*, established a distinction between separation theory and imperfection theory, and made some comparisons to works in the 1680s period. Now it is time to tackle Leibniz's major work, the *Theodicy*.

## ***The Theodicy***

In the introduction, I mentioned the thesis that there are several types of similarity between VdA and the *Theodicy*. To summarize, the *Theodicy* contains discussions of several topics that are at least touched upon in VdA, for instance those on middle

knowledge, privation theory, the Lazy Reason, and the evil will. It also employs a similar strategy. Many of these points come up in Book One of the *Theodicy* or even earlier. Thus I suggest that, as in VdA, Leibniz is exorcising old beliefs and clearing ground for his own ideas, which he gradually introduces. Because of the length and nature of the *Theodicy*, I intend to present these findings roughly in order of importance.

Leibniz's main intent is to discuss reconciling the power of God with the freedom of man:

> I have taken up my pen more than once...to give explanations on these important matters. But finally I have been compelled to gather up my thoughts on all these connected questions, and to impart them to the public. It is this that I have undertaken in the Essays which I offer here, on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil.[103]

Thus, this is the same exact issue he takes up in VdA, with the added question of the (metaphysical) origin of evil. In fact, the above passage even indicates that he has perhaps looked through his previous writings on evil before writing the *Theodicy*. There are some indications he may have done so, mostly pertaining to the content of both works, but also with respect to the style. It should be apparent from the *Confessio* alone that Leibniz was no stranger to experimenting with different forms of presentation, but for some reason he wrote the *Theodicy* not in the careful and laconic style of the *Monadology* or in the engaging, if perplexing, format of a dialogue, but in a style which has one major predecessor: 'Von der Allmacht und Allwissenheit Gottes und der Freiheit

[103] *Theodicy* Preface 55

des Menschen'. Now, this claim is partially my own opinion—nowhere does Leibniz say that he was inspired "by a short piece I wrote many years ago in my unwieldy native tongue". However, for me these stylistic and contentful similarities, when taken together, form a plausible case for the influence of VdA on the *Theodicy*.

In the Preface and the other early parts of the *Theodicy* (say, through most of Book I), Leibniz adopts a similar language, tone and narrative structure as that of VdA. First of all, the sentiments expressed can get a bit flowery (can you imagine the *Monadology* beginning with, "Of all the questions that bewilder the human race" or with "There are two famous labyrinths where our reason very often goes astray"?). But rather than mere poetic embellishment, this language is meant to grip you and immerse you in the problem at hand. Furthermore, Leibniz adopts the tone that he might in a letter or a public speech, using a lot of 'we' and 'you' and relating his plan for the work, as well as past achievements, as he might to a correspondent (more about this later). Of course, the *Theodicy* was originally published anonymously, but that is even more suitable: the work becomes that of an anonymous narrator speaking to his anonymous correspondents. Also, as we shall see when I discuss the content of the *Theodicy*, but which should be apparent to anyone who has read the book, Leibniz summons a host of historical scholars and ideas. Not only does this demonstrate his intelligence and erudition, but it serves to educate the reader (or, if you prefer, to inundate readers with more names and terms than a Tolstoy novel). Thus, although Leibniz remains focused on advancing his positive philosophy and defeating the ideas of his opponents, there is a 'wandering' feel to the work, as there was in VdA. Likewise, there is the language issue: at the end of the

Preface Leibniz apologizes for any mistakes in his French and takes full responsibility for them. This remark lends credence to Sleigh's idea that "perhaps some measure of Leibniz's usual precision is a byproduct of writing in languages foreign to him, i.e., Latin and French".[104] My suggestion is that it wasn't until late in his career that Leibniz felt comfortable writing in this style in French and Latin, and considering that he must have abandoned the idea advanced in VdA that German was a suitable language for philosophy (an idea supported by empirical evidence, or rather, by a paucity of works in that language), the reason that so few of his texts are written in this style does have to do with the language barrier. Although I do agree with Sleigh that this style makes the *Theodicy* very 'flowery' and 'bombastic' compared to his other works, I must point out here that Leibniz's contemporary audience had different sensibilities than we do. Whereas most of his works are shockingly modern, Leibniz wrote the *Theodicy* in a style that was pitched towards a general audience (not by way of Russell's public/private distinction, but in terms of what was most marketable and familiar). One needs but peruse the works of Swift, Defoe and Berkeley (who all published works in 1710) to feel the weight of the three hundred years that separate us from the *Theodicy*. Consider this sentence from the beginning of Berkeley's *Principles*:

> Prejudices and errors of sense do from all parts discover themselves to our view; and, endeavouring to correct these by reason, we are insensibly drawn into uncouth paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies, which multiply and grow upon us as we advance in speculation, till at length, having wandered through many intricate mazes, we find ourselves just where we were, or, which

[104] Introduction to the Yale *Confessio* volume, xxiv

is worse, sit down in a forlorn Scepticism.[105]

In terms of historical doctrines, Leibniz discusses the Lazy Reason twice in the *Theodicy*, both times invoking a familiar line of argument to defeat it. Immediately after he introduces and motivates the problem of evil, he says that "men have been perplexed by" the Lazy Reason for centuries and have taken it to imply that "that which must happen will happen, whatever I may do".[106] Leibniz again stresses the solution—that foreknowledge of an event must be separated from the causes of an event. He likens it to the Turkish chain of necessity and says that one must avoid reasoning in the Turkish fashion. Then, later on, in Book One, he brings it up again, using his theory of possible worlds to help him. God foresaw what would happen freely and chose the best possible world on the basis of the effects and causes within it. However, that does not mean that the effects come about without "proportionate causes".[107] Thus, although Leibniz's possible-worlds theory allows him to explicate the fallacy of the Lazy Reason, it is not *required* to do so; he defeats it in the Preface exactly as he did in VdA, by showing that foreknowing the causes and effects is not the same as causing the effects.

Also present in the Book One are a couple other ideas which should be familiar to us—first is the idea of an evil will, which Leibniz said in VdA was wholly responsible for sin. Here he says:

> An evil will is in its department what the evil principle of the Manicheans would be in the universe; and reason, which is an image of the Divinity, provides for evil

[105] Introduction to the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, S1
[106] *Theodicy* Preface 54-6.
[107] *Theodicy* I.55 (156)

> souls great means of causing much evil. One single Caligula, one Nero, has caused more evil than an earthquake.[108]

This quote is quite puzzling given the rest of Leibniz's moral psychology (it doesn't seem as though most rational people can knowingly do great harm, but 'evil souls' can cause much evil by use of reason?) but the core idea which is present both here and in VdA is that an evil will is the worst possible thing a human can have and makes that human being responsible for the sins it commits. The next familiar idea is entangled with the concept of God's prescience not being predestination—it is the idea of *scientia media.*[109] In my discussion of VdA I associated this with Buridan's ass, which Leibniz does explicitly in Section 49. Leibniz still holds that middle knowledge is impossible because God simply would not foreknow what choice someone would make if there were not a sufficient reason to make that choice; thus he believes that a scenario of indifference (that is, where reason doesn't incline one way or the other) is impossible. It violates both the conception of God as omniscient and prescient, and Leibniz's PSR. To enumerate the problem, Leibniz once again takes us to Ziklag (now correctly named Keilah) and launches yet another argument which should be familiar to readers of VdA. Leibniz does use possible worlds in his discussion, but again they play only an illustrative role.

I believe that the historical theories and fallacies discussed in both works play the same role: they help men confront the reality of evil by facing it with faith that is reinforced by reason. This dictates their attitude towards evil and their responsibility toward sin; that is,

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[108] *Theodicy* I.26 (141-2)
[109] Leibniz also takes this up in Book Three, Sections 303-306.

men understand the origin of sin and can take solace in the fact that this is the best possible world when sin befalls them while still shouldering responsibility for the sins that they commit (and understanding the origin of such sins might help men sin less). As Leibniz points out in VdA, anger towards God at sin's existence is unproductive; even if a person has no understanding of why God didn't make men or the world free of sin, "it is enough that [they] did not want to give up...sinning and take responsibility".[110] Leibniz believes that much of the work towards being saved lies in one's attitude; hence why there is nothing worse than an evil will, and why understanding who is to blame is so important. Though Voltaire blasted Leibniz on the very point that it is not much consolation in the face of suffering to tell oneself that this is the best possible world, this oversimplifies Leibniz's theory. Written in a time of personal tragedy for Leibniz, the *Theodicy* is the work of someone who understands how shallow such a belief can seem. But the point for any Christian is not to lose sight of the end goal of salvation. Although things may seem unjust in this world, not only is it but a shadow compared to the next, but it is the world in which punishment and reward are given out accordingly. Thus I don't think it is silly at all to desperately cling to Leibnizian optimism and to use nothing but rational faith as a panacea for dealing with evil. For a rational theologian like Leibniz, it is the only thing that makes sense, and it is why he finds Bayle's supremacy of faith over reason both disturbing in itself and in what kind of world would exist if it were true. Thus Leibniz must provide a rationally plausible picture of evil's existence.

[110] A.VI.i 542

This brings us to privation theory. This is a section of the *Theodicy* in which Leibniz begins to bring in his positive views in a more substantial way than before. He introduces the famous boat analogy to explain imperfection theory:

> Let us suppose that the current of one and the same river carried along with it various boats, which differ among themselves only in the cargo, some being laden with wood, others with stone, and some more, the others less. That being so, it will come about that the boats most heavily laden will go more slowly than the others...it is not, properly speaking, weight which is the cause of this retardation...[it is] matter itself which originally is inclined to slowness or privation of speed...to moderate by its receptivity the effect of the impression.[111]

In the historical picture, God would control the boats, the current and the speed in such a way that the creature would contribute exactly nothing. But by introducing the concept of inertia, which is taken from the physical idea endorsed by Kepler and Descartes (among others), Leibniz has provided an intelligible way for the creature to resist goodness and to be responsible for its resistance. Whereas before reality was divided into 'positive' and 'negative' and the concept of privation led directly to sin, however unclearly, now the privation is internal to the creature as an 'original imperfection' that limits the amount of goodness it can receive. This imperfection, in turn, leads to particular instances of sin (the way that chronic joint pain can suddenly 'flare up'). To bring the idea back to the boat analogy, the burden of this inertia determines the speed of the boat and how fast it goes with the current. In the analogy, the natural inclination is towards goodness, so when man tends towards it, he acts in accordance with God, and when he goes against it, he is still

[111] *Theodicy* I.30 (143-4)

acting concurrently with God, but because he is pulling in a different direction, God is free of all blame. While it is true that God still takes part in sinful actions, to say that he does not would, as Leibniz puts it on multiple occasions, destroy the chain of causes that ultimately extends back to God.

The question is where the concurrence comes from under 'original imperfection' theory. The short answer is this: God desires to create a perfect musician, but the musician only receives part of the total goodness given to him by God. Then, God creates the circumstances of giving a concert on December 4 at 8:00. The musician's failure to receive all of God's goodness, due to his own nature, will result in his flubbing a couple of measures in a difficult passage. But the responsibility isn't God's; it's the musicians. (Perhaps he should have practiced more). In Leibniz the connection between the original imperfection and each instance of sin isn't well-explicated, nor is the idea of degrees of receptivity to goodness and what exactly is blocking the full allowance of goodness from being imparted to each creature.

However, problems such as the above pale in comparison to the necessitarian worry about the *Theodicy*:

(1) The best possible world is necessarily enacted. (God can (debatably) choose to create W or not to create W, but he is bound, if he creates, to create W).

(2) Evils exist only as a means to obtain W.

(3) Evils exist in W.

(4) W is the best possible world. Therefore its constituents are pre-determined. As such, God knows all the details of the occurrence of every single evil.

(5) God exists.

(C) *Each* particular evil in W is willed by God. (is necessary).

Adding in Leibniz's idea of the complete concept of a person—that somehow, all the of details and particulars of a person are contained in the concept of that person in God's mind—the idea that, for instance, the contents of God's mind and the facts that his foreknowledge tells him can be separated from his actions in a meaningful manner is a bit silly. Nevertheless, that is what Leibniz wants. Whether that is acceptable to his readers is another question.

## *A Posteriori* Reasoning

Before going on, I intend to discuss the concept of *a posteriori* reasoning. This is a topic that came up both in my discussion of VdA and of the *Theodicy*, and there are more conclusions to be drawn. In VdA I introduced the idea of *a posteriori* validity, the idea that one can reason backward in order to explicate causes. The notion itself is nothing new, having a rich history stretching back to the time of Aristotle, who first developed what we might think of as science to explain the world rather than metaphysics (which works the opposite way).

However, the issue of whether this idea applies to *Leibniz's* science is one that I want to avoid for the most part. It has been written on at length, by Kulstad and Garber among others, and has attracted a lot of attention recently. Although I do agree that Leibniz's thought here is relevant, the question is really *how*. Garber believes that Leibniz's stance on the laws of nature changed in two ways during his life—although Leibniz always held that the laws of nature could be derived *a priori*, he changed his mind on two related issues and, at the time of the *Theodicy*, believed that the derivation of such laws depended on divine wisdom and that the laws of nature were thus contingent. Part of Leibniz's motivation could easily have come from a theologically-charged issue such as that of miracles, which Leibniz believes cannot violate logical necessity, but *can* violate physical necessity.[112] If the laws of nature were strictly derivable *a priori*, without depending on God (a view which the young Leibniz supported), then there is no way to explain how they can be altered.

However, I want to move away from a strict identification of the two issues (*a priori* and *a posteriori* method applicability to matters of faith versus matters of science) for several reasons. Though I think that ultimately someone must really make sense of the issue catholically, either positing a real separation between the two areas of Leibniz's thought (and justifying it plausibly) or formulating an all-encompassing system consistent with itself and with the late Leibniz's thought, I am not equipped to handle the job, especially not within the scope of this project. It is my wish to demonstrate the case for the theological side; someone else can connect this labyrinth with the other.[113] The thesis that

[112] *Theodicy* Dissertation 21 (89)
[113] *Theodicy* Preface 55

such a connection can be made is itself controversial; in a recent paper Garber argued that Leibniz was not a great systematizer, despite his reputation among the metaphysics-hating analytic philosophers like Carnap, and that we should view his ideas as "loosely connected stars in the constellations of his thought.[114] Whether that interpretation is agreeable (and to many it was not; Garber himself has moderated his stance on the subject[115]), the *Theodicy's* connection to Leibniz's other works has been especially poorly understood. Although many of the remarks that Garber and Kulstad utilize are from the *New Essays*, a work from the same period as the *Theodicy*, the *New Essays* are themselves a response to John Locke, we're not sure how strongly Leibniz's theology is connected to his science, and it is enough for me merely to connect Leibniz's early and middle thought on evil with his later thought.

While we're discussing these sorts of issues, my labels of 'early', 'middle' and 'late' are supposed to be neutral markers rather than set time periods to which I'm strongly committed. We can all agree that Leibniz started writing about evil and related problems early in his career, continued writing about them throughout, and then wrote a book on the subject. Part of my project has been to mark out when changes occurred and why, tracing out a line of understandable evolution in his thought. Although we don't have the important text from his juvenile period which would at least allow us to place VdA closer to that work or to the *Confessio*, there may be at minimum three periods of development that all culminate in a significant work, or, given other developments in his career that

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[114] Daniel Garber, paper presented at the Notre Dame Conference "Leibniz's Theodicy: Context and Content", South Bend, IN, September 17th, 2010

[115] Daniel Garber, interview held during the Eastern Division APA, Boston, MA, December 28th, 2010

may have impacted his thought on evil, as many as five. Likewise, had Leibniz not died in 1716, he may have gone on to develop a theodicy that sought to remedy the *Theodicy's* problems, just as he did in every preceding period when he realized that his solution wasn't good enough (Dan Garber at least believes that Leibniz's thought would have evolved if he had not been interrupted by his death).[116]

There are some philosophical problems with the issue of reconciling science and faith in Leibniz's thought as well. There is a difference between the ideal derivation of the laws of nature and the ways in which human beings process the world around them in order to gain knowledge. Furthermore, knowledge might be different than 'laws of nature', which have traditionally had a special status even if both are understood propositionally (countless problems in philosophy of science have arisen trying to figure out what exactly that special status is). Therefore, although ultimately for Leibniz all the laws and states of affairs depend on God, I feel secure in bracketing off the laws of nature.

In order to continue making my case for similarities between VdA and the *Theodicy*, I am going to summarize (extremely briefly) the case for *a posteriori* reasoning in matters of faith from VdA. This is in line with Leibniz's conclusions about matters of theology. In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz starts by examining the relationship of faith and reason and then turning to metaphysical truths. Although he doesn't believe that faith and reason are incompatible, he definitely is working from the approach enumerated in 'De libertate', which is not from first principles but from "religion and practical philosophy...reconciled

[116] In my first Leibniz seminar, Garber essentially concluded the story of Leibniz the philosopher with "And then he died." But there is something admirable about the fact that Leibniz never stopped in that regard, that he was always trying to improve on what he had.

with the principles of speculative philosophy".[117] In VdA, Leibniz not only connected imagination and conceivability with possibility, but he considered the fact that sins exist in the world to be a fact which we can know *a posteriori*.

Leibniz is clearer about these things in the Preliminary Dissertation. Saying that "reason, since it consists in the linking together of truths, is entitled to connect also those therewith experience has furnished it".[118] However, he insists that pure reason deals only with *a priori* truths, whereas faith may be compared with experience, because faith depends on the account of those who have seen miracles and the inherited tradition of religion.[119] Next, he distinguishes between logical and positive truths. Logical truths are necessary truths, whereas positive truths "are the laws which it has pleased God to give Nature, or because they depend on those".[120] Then Leibniz expounds the different types of positive truths:

> We learn them either by experience, that is, *a posteriori*, or by reason and *a priori*, that is, by the considerations of the fitness of things which have caused their choice.[121]

Leibniz claims that the Mysteries can only be known *a posteriori* because although they can be explained satisfactorily, we cannot comprehend them.[122] Thus, they can be moral certainties, but not absolute ones. (In case of a conflict between the two, absolute certainties have priority). According to this recasting of matters of faith and matters of

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[117] A.VI.iv 1595-1612
[118] *Theodicy* Dissertation 1 (75)
[119] *Theodicy* Dissertation 1 (75)
[120] Ibid. 2 (76)
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid. 5 (78)

reason, both faith and reason offer avenues to understanding—faith's, though it can explain greater affairs than human reason can, conveys less certainty due to its loftier subject matter.

After a long aside about the historical relationship of faith and reason, including his famous distinction between *above* and *against* reason, Leibniz returns to discussing another problem which is in the domain of faith rather than reason—the existence of evil.[123] Part of his objective is to rationally defend theology in a curious manner—rather than arguing against the philosophies of his opponents (though he makes it clear who they are and what they believe), Leibniz seeks to provide an alternative theory that is better than theirs. The audience can judge whose theory is the most successful. This, according to Leibniz, is a 'demonstration', and I believe that he makes use of this method at least three times in his career (although in every case, he skews the distinction somewhat by addressing the beliefs of his opponents and pointing out their flaws). The *Confessio* may also be seen as a type of demonstration, but because it is a dialogue in which a philosopher is convincing a theologian of his arguments, it is less clear that that is what Leibniz intended (as any good Platonist scholar knows, the philosophical dialogue form has the great advantage and/or weakness of placing the author at a remove from its content).

So Leibniz begins with a familiar line of argument:

> It should even be concluded that there must have been great or rather invincible reasons which prompted the divine Wisdom to the permission of evil that

[123] Ibid. 23 (90)

> surprises us, from the mere fact that this permission has occurred: for nothing can come from God that is altogether inconsistent with goodness, justice and holiness. Thus we can judge by the event (or *a posteriori*) that the permission was indispensible, although it be not possible for us to show this (*a priori*) by the detailed reasons that God can have had therefor.[124]

Thus sins exist and God allowed them to exist; therefore, we must construct a plausible explanation for it *a posteriori*, while accepting that we will never understand it according to the chain of causes that actually motivated God.

Compare this passage from VdA:

> Who could ever have denied that it stood within God's power to banish all sins from the world, and that he did not do this, ergo, he wants the sins to remain? Yes, he wants the sins to remain. For he holds it to be better that either they remain or they cease to exist...if he holds it to be better that they cease to exist, then they must cease to exist...because they have now remained in the world, this is a sign that God holds this to be best, and therefore wants to have them remain, and therefore wants to have sins in the world. Indeed, what is more, because God is the ultimate origin of all things and the reason why they exist and why they are so and not otherwise, it follows apparently that God creates and makes the sins of the world. Why do I now sin and commit murder? Because I will to do so and can do so. God gives me the ability to do so; the circumstances give me the will to do

[124] *Theodicy* Dissertation 35 (96)

> so, but in fact God created the circumstances too, along with the whole chain of causes back to the beginning of the world.[125]

Only God has a grasp on the chain of causes; therefore, he must have had a good reason not only to permit sin to exist, but to allow each particular sin which he foresaw. But again, we can only provide a plausible explanation for this (Leibniz's plausible explanation is presented in Book One, as I have been discussing).

However, Leibniz does worry about the idea that appearances can be deceiving—that is, that experience can lead us to judge incorrectly about the truth. In another passage he addresses this concern:

> For if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected with the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word, we *should see*, and should not *believe* only, that what God has done is the best. I call 'seeing' here what one knows *a priori* by the causes, and 'believing' what one only knows by the effects, even though the one be as certainly known as the other.[126]

This fits into Leibniz's argument that both types of arriving at positive truths are just as good, even if one is not comprehended by us (what 'comprehended' here means is something close to the Scholastic technical term of fully being able to explicate from first principles). But the contrast between seeing and believing takes us right back to VdA's

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[125] A.VI.i 543-544
[126] *Theodicy* Dissertation 44 (101)

definitions of conceivability. The original French text reads 'imaginer', which is connected with the term 'einbilden' that I discussed in VdA. Here 'imagine' is obviously a technical term and is connected with the *a priori* reasoning of the ideal reasoner—in this case, God.

## Leibniz and the Contemporary Debate

In the last section I would like to analyze Leibniz's connection of conceivability with possibility from a different angle.[127] In recent years the idea has been taken up in contemporary analytic philosophy that it is worthwhile to capture the connection between the two, and I believe that opening a dialogue with an important historical source can not only be of interest to contemporary philosophers, but will also be fruitful for Leibniz scholars as well. It is clear that the connection is not recognized in the inaugural work on the subject, Stephen Yablo's 1993 'Is Conceivability A Guide to Possibility?' (ed. 2004). Yablo introduces the problem by quoting Hume. The Hume quote is Hume's answer to the challenge of needing to distinguish between propositions which are possible and those which aren't. Hume states that "whatever the mind clearly conceives, includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible".[128] However, just as this idea has a historical background, so do doubts about its validity and applicability. Yablo cites Mill as summarizing the objection:

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[127] Although I will only be explicitly addressing VdA, the last section should have made clear that, due to the strong connections between VdA and the *Theodicy* on this issue, Leibniz's work in the *Theodicy* should also be relevant.

[128] Hume's Treatise on Human Nature, cited in Yablo.

> Our capacity or incapacity of conceiving a thing has very little to do with the possibility of the thing in itself; but is in truth very much an affair of accident, and depends on the past history and habits of our own minds.[129]

Yablo's paper addresses those who assume that p is possible if it can be conceived (which he claims is "most of us, most of the time").[130] Thus, his mission is to legitimize or codify conceivability: recognizing that the connection between conceivability and possibility is already in common use, he wants to establish some ground rules for when it can be used—or, if it is not a legitimate connection, to prove that it is not. Yablo claims straightaway that counterattacks such as "no independent evidence exists that conceivability is a guide to possibility" and that naturalism doesn't allow for "a bodily mechanism attuned to reality's modal aspects" are too broad; if accepted such arguments would work against faculties such as intuition as well (presumably a hardcore naturalist could bite the bullet and say that no such faculties exist, but Yablo's paper is aimed at a sympathetic audience).[131]

However, Yablo, like Leibniz before him, recognizes the gap between possibility and the appearance of possibility, an appearance which can be both representative (p phenomenally appearing possible) and epistemic (involving the belief that p is possible).[132] In Leibniz's *Von der Allmacht* these conditions are implicit in P1 and P2, and the actual condition, that p *really* be possible, is captured in P3. P1 states that if x is

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[129] Mill, Book II Chapter V Section 6
[130] Yablo 2; pagination is from the 2004 version available on his website.
[131] Ibid. 3
[132] Yablo 6

possible, x can be clearly explained without confusion and without contradiction. This corresponds to the epistemic appearance of possibility, because a belief must be formed that p is possible in order for the possibility/conceivability connection to be fully satisfied. Likewise, P2 deals with the representative component: p must appear possible (otherwise there would be no reason to form that belief).[133] However, P1 and P2 are meaningless without P3 which, despite its focus on action in Leibniz can be understood as an existence condition. In order to explicate this I will unpack some examples.

Let's examine the case of my becoming the President of the United States. This is something which phenomenally appears possible, though it may be about as plausible as, say, Sarah Palin becoming the President. Moreover, one can enumerate an entire chain of reasoning that moves one to believe in p, namely that I become President. (The belief doesn't have to be strong, since we are talking about bare possibility here, not plausibility or likelihood). However, in this case p is actually not possible because I was born outside of the United States (the so-called Alexander Hamilton clause). In this case, one has considered a possibility and made an error in judging it, thus forming a false belief. (Furthermore, in a case where p doesn't appear phenomenally possible, but actually is, one has not only cognitively erred, but one has also not fairly considered the possibility at all).

On the other hand, there are cases where something can be imagined but not believed. What if wizards, à la Harry Potter, actually existed? One can imagine a world in which that was the case (J.K. Rowling most fruitfully, of course, but anyone who has been

[133] 'Appearing possible' here implies that p can be imagined.

captivated by the books and movies as well); however, given what we know about the world, it would be hard even for a fanatic to form the belief that it was possible. Finally, there are also cases where one neither imagines nor believes but p is possible—these are cases of pure ignorance. In these examples there is no difference between p being an action (say, the possibility of hitting a home run in Fenway Park) and p being a property or existing thing (the possibility of being a natural blonde, the possibility of the United States). But in every case, *all three requirements together* are necessary to link conceivability with possibility. Without imagination one has not recognized the possibility correctly; without belief one has not cognitively endorsed it. Although some people (as Leibniz points out) equate imagination with conception, the resultant definition of possibility is too weak and admits things such as unicorns, married bachelors, and Hitler winning the Nobel Peace Prize. I have witnessed many arguments in philosophy which are simply quibbles about what definition of possibility is valid—some adamant person will always insist that 'possibility' does apply to those sorts of propositions, and others will be quite unable to explain why that's not correct. While in common parlance 'possibility' can be thought of in this weak way, *philosophical* possibility needs to be more rigorous in order to do any work as a valuable definition.

Yablo's paper essentially argues for this conclusion and goes on to draw ramifications about types of modal error and how we should understood modal disagreements. It shares many ideas with Leibniz's definitions and his argument against fatalism in VdA, although Leibniz is only really responding to a specific modal error that is being made, not a class of modal errors. However, despite the conditions in which Leibniz's

definitions first arose, I do believe that they had a larger impact on the development of Leibniz's modality. David Chalmers, building on Yablo's work, makes a number of important points about the link between conceivability and possibility, points which can be applied to Leibniz's work in the area. Although Chalmers has made use of the notion of conceivability before, most famously in *The Conscious Mind*, there is a 2003 paper in a Blackwell anthology that strictly addresses the issue.[134]

Chalmers motivates the problem by discussing what sort of possibility we can reasonably expect from conceivability; in his eyes, it is metaphysical possibility that is up for grabs. The first thing that he recognizes is that one cannot quibble with the power and capability of reasoning if one is to get anything from a theory of conceivability. Thus he must "take certain rational notions as primitive"—nothing more arcane than our standard assumptions about reasoning and how we evaluate conflicting ideas.[135] Leibniz must do this as well, since at the time of writing VdA it was unclear that he had developed many ideas about rationality, although there are visible notions present. Therefore, although in both philosophers it's unclear how much practical application will match the ideal process, this is not an objection to the theory itself.

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[134] *The Conscious Mind* reference is Chalmers' argument against materialism. In an expanded paper on his website, Chalmers summarizes the argument as follows: (1) P&~Q is conceivable; (2) If P&~Q is conceivable, P&~Q is metaphysically possible; (3) If P&~Q is metaphysically possible, materialism is false; (4) Materialism is false. Chalmers runs the argument such that P "is the conjunction of all microphysical truths about the universe" and Q is "an arbitrary phenomenal truth", such as that one has a zombie double or that the world is a zombie world. Chalmers goes on to discuss types conceivability in order to legitimize his argument and save it from objections; the 2003 paper can be seen as a continuation of that justification or as a somewhat separate metaphilosophical work about the connection between epistemology, metaphysics and modality. I think it is accurate to call it both.

[135] Chalmers 148

There are several conceivability distinctions in Chalmers. First, he differentiates between ideal and *prima facie* conceivability. These two ideas of conceivability are exactly what one would think they are: ideal being what is conceivable based on ideal rational reflection, and *prima facie* being the first impression of conceivability. Of course, the latter isn't based on a mere snap judgment but on a subject's process of reflection—however, *prima facie* conceivability is still prone to error, whereas ideal conceivability is not. The second distinction is between positive and negative conceivability. These are also fairly intuitive—S is negatively conceivable when S is not ruled out. Types of ruling out include *a priori*, "when there is no (apparent) contradiction in S".[136] S might also be indeterminate, although Chalmers argues against that type of ruling out due to the fact that if S is indeterminate, it is *a priori* indeterminate rather than *a priori* neutral—that is, S could be determinate or indeterminate but one must withhold judgment. To put it formally (to try to avoid confusion):

> S is negatively conceivable when det(S) cannot be ruled out;
>
> S is ideally negatively conceivable when it is **not** *a priori* that ~det(S);
>
> S is ideally indeterminate when it is *a priori* that ~det(S).[137]

This is an important distinction, because one might be tempted to conflate ideal negative conceivability with ideal indeterminacy. The easiest way to characterize the difference is this: S cannot be ruled out except in cases where there are strong motivations to do so, such as in the case of the proposition "Round squares exist", which goes against physical possibility, or in cases of logical contradiction, or in cases of privileged information (if

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[136] Chalmers 149
[137] Ibid. 149-150

you know Josh is an arachnophobe, then you can rule out the possibility that he has adopted a tarantula with strong certainty). More information is necessary to process cases where S cannot be ruled out. By contrast, indeterminate cases are those where either possibility could be true, and more information is still necessary, but the outcome could be that of a positive conception (affirming S's possibility) or a negative one (denying it). Because the 'ideal' label marks a reasoner who is always accurate, there is less overlap between the two categories than there would otherwise be.

But the more important notion is positive conceivability, because unlike negative conceivability, positive conceptions require a "positive conception of a situation in which S is the case".[138] This notion strongly connects to the issues discussed in Leibniz due to the use of the imagination. Though 'imagination' still has non-rigorous connotations, the contemporary analytic discussion has shifted towards "placing the varieties of positive conceivability under the broad rubric of *imagination*".[139] There are a couple of ways that this might be legitimized—Chalmers suggests something akin to a thought-experiment, whereas Amy Kind, another philosopher who has worked on the imagination in particular, suggests something akin to a computer simulation.[140] Positive conception, in its most rudimentary form, must involve some imagination purely because one must present a positive conception of a situation. Whether this is the rich mental landscape of the creative artist dreaming up a work or the utilitarian tools of the mathematician employing spatial reasoning is open to question.

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[138] Chalmers 150
[139] Ibid.
[140] Presented in Kind, Section II.

Chalmers attempts to refine the definition of imagination by claiming that "when one imagines a situation and reasons about it, the object of one's imagination is often revealed as a situation in which S is this case, for some S".[141] If so, the situation *verifies* S; one has imagined that S. However, the issue is very complex because "different notions of conceivability correspond to different notions of imagination".[142] Perceptual imagination involves a mental image that S, whereas modal imagination gives us an intuition that a world exists in which S. In both cases the act of imagining S must verify S. However, Chalmers is quick to point out that both types of imagining to do involve any ontological commitments. It's quite easy to imagine a world with actual Pegasi. Thus what we imagine are (in every case) apparent worlds or situations. Moreover, these worlds and situations far outstrip the limits of possibility.

In order to eliminate being able to, for instance, modally imagine a world in which round squares exist, Chalmers introduces a coherency constraint: details can be filled it, and no contradiction arises. Thus, he formulates a new definition of positive conceivability:

> S is positively conceivable when S is coherently modally imaginable.[143]

Ideal and *prima facie* versions of ideal modal conceivability can then be introduced. Our final result is that possibility in every case of S involves a modal appearance of S; however, as Chalmers says, "I think it best not to import the notion of possibility so directly into a definition of conceivability, to avoid the threat of trivializing the link with

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[141] Chalmers 150
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid. 151

possibility".[144] This is akin to both Yablo's and Leibniz's recognition that a strong identification between the two concepts is not possible; rather, an intermediate relationship must be posed.

In many ways, what Chalmers is doing is systematizing or defining the ideas picked out by Yablo and, before him, Leibniz. But there are a couple of important points that Leibniz scholars should take note of—first of all, there are two types of imagination in Chalmers, perceptual and modal. An interesting question is whether Leibniz would acknowledge both of these or if he was only talking about perceptual imagination? Despite the fact that he did not distinguish between the two in his text, I find it hard to believe that he couldn't have thought of some examples where imagining a strong visual case was difficult, especially in the theological domain. Likewise, if there is a strand of modal imagination in Leibniz, then such a thought could play an important role in understanding his idea of possible worlds. Although Leibniz didn't have a Kripkean idea of possible worlds, I find it plausible that he would consider different sets of circumstances to comprise sets of possible worlds, a belief which is only bolstered by his ideas of complete concepts and even the different 'series of affairs' from the *Confessio* period. Of course, Leibniz has an advantage over modern proponents of possible worlds in that he can define them, simply, as worlds which God could have actualized. This thesis gives him a basis for justifying his conception of possible worlds unavailable to contemporary philosophers.

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[144] Ibid. 156

Making sense of Leibniz's modality cannot occur solely as a logical discussion—that is, it must take into account his metaphysics as well. And nowhere is there a richer metaphysics in Leibniz than that which he deploys in order to solve the problem of evil, one of the two great labyrinths in which, he thought, human minds can so easily wander astray.[145]

[145] *Theodicy* Preface 55

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